this hurt in my bones (it don't hurt no more) by bytheinco_nstantmoon

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: "recreational drug use" say it with me, (john mulaney voice) i will keep all my feelings in a little ball right here, Brotherly Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Coming of Age, Damn, Dustin Gets A Backstory, Dustin Henderson Has a Crush, Dustin Henderson Needs a Hug, Dustin Henderson-centric, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Existential Crisis, First Kiss, Getting Together, Growing Up, Mike Wheeler Loves Will Byers, Multi, Mutual Pining, Oblivious Pining, Pining, Platonic Bonding, Polyamory, Post-Canon, Recreational Drug Use, SIKE, Self-Esteem Issues, Suicidal Thoughts, Tenderness, That's it that's the plot, Underage Drinking, Weed, aha im so unpredictable aha, and I'm sorry, and also will has like. friends, and then one day i'll die, angst and happy and angst and happy and angst and happy ending, cause. u know. max and dustin aren't the only people on track, he has THREE, he's my favourite sorry not sorry, hey ive never had a story betaed before, i don't have a single sense of time, i included cherries as wyatt rights, i promise it's very cute, i wrote this instead of a research paper, if troy and james and allie are all dating then that's none of my business who could say anyway, is that not a tag, it's always weed when im writing didnt u know that, it's called depression debra, it's mutual, kind of angst with a happy ending??, of course you love found family dynamics you dumb slut you're gay, shout out to me for taking two months to update, so shout out to wyatt, that's dustin, them senior year vibes, there will be ocs for plot purposes, they had a redemption arc i do not know if that will be at all onscreen or not, this is happier than it sounds????, this is literally just a rom-com w mental illness, troy and james r chill or whatever, you know im a slut for it
Language: English
Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, James Dante, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Troy Walsh (Stranger Things), Will Byers
Relationships: Dustin Henderson & Original Character(s), Eleven | Jane Hopper/Dustin Henderson/Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Robin Buckley & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington &

Dustin Henderson, Troy Walsh/James Dante/Original Female Character(s), Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler
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Summary:

He likes this feeling, sitting on the flat part of the roof and letting his legs dangle in thin air. He likes that thought that at any moment, he could slip over. If he pushed himself. If he let go. If he wanted to.

He’s alive, but he doesn’t have to be.
--
There's nothing wrong with him. Of that, Dustin is certain. Sure, life has led him down this course, and it's all twisted and winding and makes him hurt, all miserable and alone, but that was life's fault, not his; and there's only one way out.

Dustin wants the fuck out.

(sometimes, though, sometimes- there's another way, and sometimes if he squints, he thinks he might see it.)
--
this is just the post-canon dustin/el/max/lucas get together fic i need sorry y'all

1. i have a record player

Notes for the Chapter:

> chapter title is from "record player song" by daisy the great
>
> i already have the tags, but I figured it was prudent to give trigger warnings here for mental illness and discussion of suicide. be careful, kiddos!

It feels natural. It shouldn't feel natural. There's nothing natural about it; it's just another fucked up part of him, just another reason for him to be an outcast, just another problem. Just another thing to make him the worst. Just another thing for him to fall behind.

God, he's falling so far behind.

It's not even that he wants to die. He doesn't want to die, not really, but he's come so close to it so many times, and he's tasted it, and he knows what it would feel like, he thinks; it wouldn't feel good, but he's pretty sure it wouldn't feel bad. He's pretty sure it wouldn't feel like anything at all, actually, like going numb, and he could just slip into it all easy, like going to sleep. Like it was meant to happen. He's pretty sure it would feel natural.

He's also pretty sure it's fucked up to think that way.

It's not totally new. The peace of mind about it, that's new; there's no more edge to it, like there used to be, because he used to think of it, sometimes, when it was late or when he was alone or sometimes unprompted at some stupid fucking time like the middle of math class, and his whole chest would seize up and his back would go rigid and his leg would start going a million miles a minute because *fuck* , what if he died? What if he died and he was gone and nobody even noticed and nobody even cared and it was awful and empty and there was nothing and the world was just over and *he was dead and he was gone and nobody cared and -*

He doesn't panic anymore. He still thinks about it, though, thinks

about it more than he'd care to admit. It's become a kind of background noise, just a steady thrum in his brain, a second heartbeat, reminding him that he's alive but he doesn't have to be. He's going to die, the beat says. He's going to die someday, and that day can be whatever day he wants, and there's nothing stopping him, not if he wants it.

Except that's not true, is it?

That's the trouble with it all; Dustin would be perfectly alright debating his own worth and purpose and mortality on his lonesome, but he's not on his lonesome, and that's the trouble. He's stuck with all of them, but it's not really like that, it's more like they're stuck with him, and he keeps meaning to stop making them deal with him, but he keeps clinging because he loves them; he loves them and he doesn't want to lose them; he loves them.

(Probably. He thinks he loves them, but there are moments when he is so full of this darkness, of this anger, that all he can do is bite back tears until he bleeds and curl his fingers up into fists so tight they sting and pull at his hair until it's coming loose in his grip and think about how he *hates* it, how he hates Hawkins and he hates being angry and he hates being alive and he *hates them, he can't fucking stand them, why are they always there*- but those moments come when it's dark and he's alone and crying and always seem sort of surreal afterwards, so. You know. He ignores them.)

He loves them. They're his family. They're *him* , more a part of him than anything he's ever personally been, and he loves them. (And he hates them sometimes, because they make up him, because they make him hesitate, and he doesn't want to hesitate. He doesn't want to be him.)

Dustin kicks his feet back and forth, humming under his breath. He hadn't been thinking about it when he climbed up here- he'd mostly been thinking that *holy shit, Steve's house has a back stairwell,* and then he'd been thinking, *holy shit, if I climb out this back window I can sit on Steve's roof,* and nobody had been there to stop him, so he had climbed out a back window on Steve's house, balancing a little precariously, and miraculously hadn't fallen. It was nearly ten minutes later that he began wondering if that was really a miracle.

There isn't anything wrong, per se. He kicks his feet again. He likes this feeling, sitting on the flat part of the roof and letting his legs dangle in thin air. He likes that thought that at any moment, he could slip over. If he pushed himself. If he let go. If he wanted to.

He's alive, but he doesn't have to be.

He can still hear the music from downstairs. He feels a little bad ditching on Max's birthday party, but he'd already given her gift and distributed appropriately proportioned attention to everyone and had only been standing in the kitchen anyway, looking for something to do. Max's birthday has been Dustin's favorite day of the summer for the past few years, so he has to laugh a little bit, because it's his favorite day of the summer and he's feeling good but he's on Steve's roof swinging his feet back and forth over the edge and thinking about how he could slip over if he wanted to, and he doesn't know why. There's rarely a why. It's just how it is.

Dustin huffs out another, smaller laugh, laying back against the shingles and closing his eyes. He wonders if they've noticed he's gone. Probably not, honestly, which should sting a little, but it doesn't. He knows his place in the group. It's not an important one.

Dustin knows them well, he likes to think, and at moments at night when he's thinking about them too deeply he likes to think nobody knows them better than him; that's not true, of course, because of course people know them better than he does, because they all know each other better than he does, but it's still a nice thought, so Dustin entertains it when he has the time. He doesn't have that many nice thoughts these days. Not that his thoughts are bad, they're just all sort of hazy and grey, slipping through his head and past him and never leaving any impact.

Sort of like him. He doesn't leave much of an impact.

He has to go back soon. He knows he has to. They haven't noticed he's gone yet, certainly, but soon enough Mike will have gotten fed up with whatever arguments he'd decided to pick and will be milling around, because he'll have caught himself staring at Will and needs a distraction, and he'll turn around to look for Dustin because that's when Mike looks for Dustin. And Dustin is there to talk about

something arbitrary and pretend he doesn't know why Mike is distracting himself.

He should probably bring it up sometime, the staring. But he's never brought it up before and it's been happening their whole lives, so he figures it's not a big deal, is it? It's just the way it is; the sun rises in the east and two plus two is four and Mike Wheeler is in love with Will Byers, and Dustin Henderson spends his friend's birthday party on the roof of a house he doesn't live in, thinking about himself and nothing.

Himself and nothing. Synonyms, kind of, aren't they? Dustin used to think of himself as a drag, sort of, as an inconvenience, like he was causing some kind of minor problem by hanging around, but he's realised over time that he's not an issue. He doesn't need to be solved. He doesn't *need* to go away, he just doesn't need to stay. There's no difference either way. They wouldn't be happier without him, and they'll certainly have a momentary stain of sadness when he dies, but they won't be any worse off, and they'll adjust within the week. All those other times they lost people, it left this sort of hole, this gaping pit, but Dustin isn't enough of a person to leave that kind of dent. He leaves the shallowest indent possible. He's just there and someday he won't be and that day could be today.

He needs to go back downstairs. He doesn't want to.

"Dustin?" Oh. Ok.

He tilts his head to the side, letting his cheek press against the shingles. "Hey, man." Steve is hanging sort of halfway out the window, an elbow propped up against the roof so that he can lean over and look at Dustin. It's sort of weird, being looked at like that, like he's something worth looking at, but Steve looks at everything that way. It's nice. It's one of the good thoughts.

Steve's eyes drift to his legs. Dustin kicks them again, and Steve's lips press together in that way they always do when he's holding something back. He wants to say something.

He probably thinks Dustin is being an idiot. He probably thinks Dustin hasn't thought through what could happen, lying up here with

his legs dangling off the side, and Dustin kicks his legs again, just to prove that it's not an accident they're there. He's stupid, yeah, always has been, but he's smart enough to die.

He's alive, but he doesn't have to be.

"Mike was looking for you," Steve says after a moment, and Dustin can't help but laugh. *Right on cue.* "Max was too, earlier. Lucas and Will dragged her downstairs, though. They're trashing my basement as we speak."

Dustin shifts onto his side and tucks his head onto his bent elbow so that he can smile at Steve. "What, they hadn't already?" Steve snorts a little, his fingers tapping on the roof.

"You're all growing up on me, I guess," he says, and his voice is still light, but it's a little wary, and Dustin realises with a sudden start that Steve is nervous. This is making him nervous. Dustin clears his throat awkwardly, because for some reason that makes this conversation much harder to hold.

"I guess we are."

It's been a long time since they first fought monsters together. They've fought other types of monsters in the meantime; readjusting after Will moved away, readjusting after Robin headed off to her fancy university and Steve tagged along to some community college nearby; all the fighting in freshman year and their friend group falling apart sophomore year and all of junior year when they were finding dates and going to games and relearning each other and finally figuring it out. Finally friends again, and this summer has felt like the first real one since that godawful one they had three years ago when the fucking Russians were making their lives hell or whatever happened exactly. Dustin likes to pretend he doesn't remember it.

"When is Will going home?" he asks absently, feeling very distracted. Steve's fingers twitch.

He glances at Dustin's feet again. "Couple of days, I think." Will and Jane are staying with Steve, because they wanted to stay for Max's

birthday but Jonathan had some sort of adult responsibility in New York City that they'd all made fun of him for and Joyce never came on the summer trips, only the holiday ones, and so they're staying for much longer than the past few summers, and Dustin thinks he'll probably miss them much more when they leave. Partially because this summer has been good, partially because he loves them, and partially because there's a looming doubt in his mind that he'll ever see them again. "Whatcha doin' up here, kiddo?"

"Not a kiddo," Dustin replies automatically. "I'll be eighteen in like…" fuck, he doesn't know. "I'll be eighteen at some point," he finishes lamely, and Steve laughs a little bit, but the question is still hanging between them. "I just needed a break. To think, you know."

Steve hums in reply and wriggles out the window, crawling up next to him. They're silent for a moment as he settles in. The sky has gotten much darker, somehow, and the lights from the pool are reflecting off Dustin's legs. "Whatcha thinkin' about?"

Dustin shifts again, presses his head against Steve's hip, and Steve lets him. "Don't know. Wasn't doing much thinking."

Steve hums again, his fingers playing a little bit with Dustin's hair. "Right. So, uh, why are you laying here?"

Oh. He's concerned.

Dustin laughs, because that's what he does best. "Why not?" Steve's lips press together as Dustin's legs swing again, and he hears the back door open, and someone calls Steve's name. Will, he thinks. Neither of them pay it any mind.

Steve is worried, and Dustin isn't entirely sure how to fix that. A little bit of panic edges in, because he can't tell Steve what he's thinking, but he can't lie, he's never been able to lie to Steve, and Steve is worried. Steve has never been concerned about this before. It's new territory. Steve has never had any reason to worry about Dustin jumping off a roof, actually, which is probably why he's never worried about it, but he's worrying about it now. His lip is caught between his teeth and he's staring down at Dustin, his fingers tapping on his knee, and he's anxious; he's anxious about Dustin. Dustin can't

fucking stand that. He's not an inconvenience, he knows that, but he becomes one if Steve finds out. He's a problem if Steve finds out because Steve is too kind to look away and let Dustin kill himself and Dustin doesn't really want to kill himself anyway but he likes the thought and he likes knowing that he could (and really that's a lie and he does want it, he wants it so fucking bad; it's like a physical ache, like his chest is caving in, because he wants to die *so fucking bad* but there's no point to dying, none at all, just like there's no point to him and god, he wants to kill himself. he wants it.) and Steve is worried. Fuck.

"Do you think I'm suicidal?"

Steve breathes in sharply, and Dustin feels his own face drain of color, because that wasn't what he meant to ask. That wasn't the way to make Steve less concerned.

"I-" Steve glances at his feet again, and his vague grip on Dustin's hair seems to tighten. He looks down at him again, looking stricken, looking like he's been struck by something awful. "Are you?" he asks in reply, his voice quiet.

Dustin kicks his legs. He closes his eyes.

Maybe, he thinks, maybe it's best to let it all go. Maybe it's best to paint out a nice little picture, something about old habits and recovery and how he's only thinking of the past and he's ok; it is an old habit, after all, and he has recovered from the anxiety of it, and paint those pretty words and then go home, get it all over with. Put himself to rest.

God, what if he killed himself tonight?

"Dustin?" Steve's voice sounds fragile.

His eyes slip open, staring up past Steve, staring at the sky. "No."

"No?"

"No, I'm not." He smiles a little bit, but he knows it's small and vague and unconvincing, and he can't do it. He can't fucking do it. He can't lie to Steve. "Hey, I love you, you know."

Steve runs those fingers through his hair again. “I love you too.” And he probably does, because Steve loves everyone he can, but Dustin is nothing different, nothing special, and as much as it warms his heart to hear Steve say it, it’s nothing of a deterrent.

He’s alive for now, but he doesn’t have to be, and he doesn’t think he will be much longer.

“Dustin.” His fingers are tapping against Dustin’s temple lightly. “Can you promise me?”

“Promise what?” Dustin doesn’t look at him yet. He can’t. He can’t see Steve’s face, all concerned like that, like there’s something to be concerned about. He can’t. Not right now.

Steve’s voice cracks a little. “That you’re not suicidal.” There’s a long pause. The sky is turning indigo. “Dustin,” he says, a little louder. “Tell me you’re not going to fucking kill yourself?”

Dustin shrugs.

Steve’s fingers freeze.

“I don’t want to die.”

They’re both silent for a moment, but the silence is thick and heavy and when Dustin breaks it, his words feel like stones.

“I think about it, though.”

Steve lets out a long, shuddering breath, his eyes closing for a moment. “You think about dying,” he says, and his voice is strangled, like it hurts to get the words out. Dustin leans into him more on instinct. “Just… general dying, or..?”

Dustin laughs, but it falls flat and just makes Steve’s expression break a little more. “I think about killing myself,” he clarifies, and it feels weird. He’s never said it out loud before, he doesn’t think, and that makes it… he doesn’t know. Different, somehow. It sounds worse when he says it out loud. “It’s not a big deal or anything,” he continues. His eyes drift closed again, just in time to miss Steve’s expression morphing to horror. “It’s nothing new. It’s just a lot

calmer these days."

Steve sounds weird, like he's holding back tears, but that doesn't make sense because Steve doesn't cry, and Steve definitely doesn't cry over Dustin. "What you mean, it's calmer?"

Dustin keeps talking, because now that he's started, he doesn't know how to stop, and the air is thick and dark and caught in his lungs, but it feels addictive, letting one of his deeper secrets slip out into the air like this. "It doesn't make me panic anymore," he says, and he doesn't see Steve's face go white in the darkening evening. "Feels natural."

"It's fucking not."

Dustin hums, says "I don't know," and keeps talking, his voice getting a little dreamier as he keeps going. "It is, sort of. I mean, it's not, because it's not nature doing it, I'm not sick or anything, but I think it's sort of natural. I've always sort of thought about it, you know? Even when I was really little and stuff, but I didn't think about it the same way then. I didn't think about it like dying. It was just that… well, my mom was pretty distant, for a while. Not very emotionally available. I had a little brother, you know, but he and my dad… you know. Car crash. And Mom kind of forgot about me, because she didn't fucking know how to handle it, and I thought a lot about disappearing because I always seemed to disappear at home." He opens his eyes. Steve is still staring at him, and he looks so *sad* , and Dustin smiles a little bit at him. That always makes people sad, but he's mostly moved on. "I was just a kid, you know?" he says softly. "I was so little. I thought I could do anything, and then suddenly I could do nothing and it was just me and mom. And I love her. I fucking adore her, you know that, but I didn't always, and I've always hated myself for that, just a little."

Steve still looks so sad, and Dustin's throat feels thick, so he has to pause for a minute before he continues.

"I'm not sick," he says again. "It's just that I'm not anything else either." Steve makes a tiny noise in the back of his throat. "I'm just not… anything. And that's ok, most of the time. I don't really mind it. I'm not causing anyone a problem by sticking around, you know? It's

just that the older I get, the easier the thought is." He shrugs, lets himself smile again. "I think a lot about how I could die if I wanted, but that's not exactly right. I could die whenever, just up and drown myself in the bathtub or some shit, but there's a reason I think about it, you know? There's a reason I've thought about it for so long. I'm not sick, but it's natural anyway. It's just that it's how I'm meant to be. Born to die and all that."

The silence feels heavier. His chest feels lighter, though.

There's a strangled sob, and then a pause, and then Steve's arm is slipping around him and Dustin yelps as he pulled up into a sitting position, tugged against Steve's side, and Steve's face is buried in his hair and he can't do anything but cling onto the older boy's shirt as he cries, his chest heaving under Dustin's hands. "Steve," he says once, but there's no response to it, so he just sits there and lets Steve hold him and hides his face in Steve's shoulder and *fuck*.

He's imagined telling someone more times than he'd like to admit, but he'd never imagined anyone to cry.

It's ages until Steve's shoulders stop trembling. His hand is cradling the back of Dustin's head, pulling him close, not letting him go, and he's holding him like he couldn't let go if he wanted. He presses a very soft kiss to Dustin's temple and then clears his throat. His voice cracks when he speaks. "We're going to get off the roof."

Dustin gets the feeling he's not going to be let back up on the roof again for a long, long time.

"We're going to get off the roof," Steve repeats, his voice a little stronger. "And we're going to go down to the living room, and you're going to let me sit there with you and you're not going to fucking leave." Dustin doesn't say anything. "And we're gonna call your friends, and they're gonna come sit with us, and you're going to let them love you."

Dustin laughs a little, but it's more exhausted than he thought it would be. "They don't," he mumbles, and Steve tightens his hold.

"You're going to let them love you," he repeats, his voice more

urgent. “Because they fucking do. And I do. And if we lost you, we-” he chokes off, and it’s silent for a long, long moment before he presses another kiss to Dustin’s temple and whispers, “You’re my little brother, ok? Can’t lose you.”

“You’d live.”

Steve holds him tighter. “You don’t know that. I don’t know that.”

And because Dustin is an asshole, he says, “You would. I did,” and pulls away, and then immediately feels bad and crawls back into Steve’s arms, because he doesn’t want him to cry again. “I’m sorry.”

Steve just whispers, “I love you,” and then he whispers it again. “I love you.” And yeah, they’ve been close for years, but they don’t say it that often, not all open and honest like that, and it hurts to hear his voice so vulnerable. It hurts because Dustin is the one that hurt him. Dustin is the one that made him hurt. And that’s not fucking right- it’s not meant to be that way. Steve isn’t meant to cry over Dustin.

Steve would cry if Dustin killed himself tonight.

“I love you,” he mumbles back, and then he hides his face in Steve’s shoulder and listens to Steve cry some more. “I’m sorry, Steve. I’m sorry. I love you.”

The sky is black and he can hardly make out Steve’s features, so he just closes his eyes and lets himself be held, lets himself pretend that maybe someone cares. He lets himself pretend, for a moment, that everything is going to be ok. He wants this all to stop, but he doesn’t want to die, so he pretends that it’s stopping. He pretends this is the catharsis he needs.

He doesn’t want to die.

He sits there and pretends that’s enough.

2. it's hard to get around the wind

Summary for the Chapter:

> "They're going to tell you they love you."
>
> Dustin knows a thing or two about love.

Notes for the Chapter:

> chapter title is from "it's hard to get around the wind" by alex turner
>
> yes, it DID take me two months to write four thousand words. no, i DO NOT remember the past two months thanks for askin

“There you are!” Mike’s head snaps over as soon as they enter the living room, and in two long strides, he’s crossing to them. “I was-” he stops. His eyes search over Dustin’s face, suddenly intense. “Were you crying?”

Dustin forces on a smile, but before he can reassure Mike that everything’s fine, Steve interrupts. “Yes.” His hand is firm on Dustin’s shoulder. “Are they- can you-” he sighs. “Can you go get everyone, please?”

Dustin frowns. “You really don’t h-” Mike is already whirling around on his heel, though, starting off sharply to find their friends. Fuck. “I don’t want to do this,” Dustin mutters. Steve’s grip contracts on his shoulder, steering him to the couch. Max and El are already there, and they scoot over to make room, their eyes searching him up and down- for injuries, he realises, a habit that’s never really died for any of them, and guilt wells up in his throat. Steve sits him down and then perches beside him on the couch arm, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. El immediately crawls over and tucks herself into his side, looking up at him with wide, concerned eyes. He tries to look reassuring with his smile, but it’s shaky and she just frowns.

“I’m ok,” he says, and El hums.

“Friends don’t lie.”

It’s been years since he heard her say that. His eyes sting again.

Steve’s hand rubs his shoulder comfortingly. “It’ll be ok, Janey,” he assures, and she relents. Max crouches down in front of him, leaning folded arms forward on his knees. Her forehead is wrinkled with concern. “It’ll be ok,” Steve repeats, but he sounds sort of choked. He’s trying to convince himself. Dustin swallows hard.

Max reaches up, brushing Dustin's hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear. “Yeah, it’ll be ok.” She smiles through her obvious concern, her hand lingering for a moment before it falls away. “He’s got this.” Part of him wonders if she knows, but he discards that thought instantly- Max doesn’t pay that much attention to him, really. She used to, back when Mike wasn’t talking to any of them and Lucas couldn’t look their way without disgust; Max had been his best friend for a while, had been his *everything,* but she’d found her other track friends and moved on from that pretty quickly.

Right now, though, with her smiling up at him like that, it feels almost like the nights they snuck out together and ran, raced each other as far as they could, ran all the way to Oldbrook and bought milkshakes at the diner that was ten times better than Hawkins and laughed at the face of the secretary when they rented a cheap motel room. It feels almost like hiking down the quarry and getting lost in the tunnels and smoking under the oak tree at the edge of town. It feels like the days he almost loved being alive, and he doesn’t have to force a smile this time.

Will drops down beside El on the couch, and Dustin is jolted out of the strange nostalgia that had flooded his blood. Will reaches around his sister and grasps his hand. “Dusty?” His voice is calming. Will’s always been the soft edge on Dustin’s panic. “Mike said you were crying.”

Dustin laughs a little. It’s empty, but he doesn’t really know what else to do. “Not right now.” Steve sighs a little. “Earlier,” he relents. “I… it’s not a big deal, guys, really.”

Max leans forward onto her arms a little more, her gaze piercing into

him. “You’re a big deal, though.” Her voice is quiet, but it’s steady. “How much you matter to us, that’s a big deal.”

Max always knows how to make him crumble.

Dustin bites the inside of his mouth hard, refusing to let the heat in his eyes take him over, but El reaches over and lays a hand on his cheek, her eyes stern, and that- the feeling that gives him, something sweet and achingly bitter, swells in his chest almost unbearably. He blinks hard. “It’s fine.”

Steve rubs his shoulder again. Kisses the top of his head. “Just tell them, ok?” he says softly. He sounds so *sad,* like there’s something wrecked in his throat, and God, there’s water caught Dustin’s eyelashes again. “Tell them what you told me, Dusty. It’s ok.” His voice chokes a little. “We love you.”

Mike has settled into the space next to Will, dark eyes fixed on Dustin intently. There’s something there, he briefly thinks, some kind of understanding, but he’s never been able to read Mike very well. Lucas, standing behind the couch, runs a hand through Dustin’s hair and says, “Yeah, we love you,” and if Lucas is saying it then he must look like a *wreck.* He doesn’t realise he’s said that out loud until Max snorts. Steve’s lips quirk up a little. “Aw, give me a little credit, man,” Lucas complains fondly, his hand still in Dustin’s hair. “I’m sweet sometimes.”

“Sweet?”

“Shut up, Jane, I’m trying to make Dustin love me.”

Dustin laughs, tilting his head back over Steve’s arm. “I do love you,” he assures. Lucas’s smile turns peculiar for a moment, but it’s gone in a flash and his thumb rubs in Dustin’s scalp. El hums, curling against him further.

Her soft hand cups his jaw. El’s a clingy kind of friend, the kind that drapes her whole body over Max during movie nights and brushes Mike’s hair for him and laces her fingers into Dustin’s when they’re walking together, and her familiar touch helps his breathing steady just a bit. Her voice is so gentle- “What’s wrong?” - and Dustin’s

throat sticks closed. He takes a shuddering breath, trying to steady himself, but his chest is stinging, and everything feels kind of empty and Max's eyes are so deep and El's hand is so soft and Will's grip is so gentle and Steve's arm is so warm and he wants to feel comforted but it's all just so overwhelming and- "God, I can't-" he shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "I can't- God, Steve, they don't-" he doesn't know what he means, what he's trying to say, but El's hand presses firmer against his jaw and turns his head. His eyes flick open and meet hers. Her gaze is intense, but not like Max's- it's not piercing into him, it's covering him. Meeting El's eyes means losing the rest of the world.

"I love you," she says. Her thumb wipes away the tears on his cheek. "I love you," she says again. "We love you." Her eyes search his. "Not alone. Never alone."

But he's always alone. He presses his lips together tautly to muffle a sob. "El-" she graciously ignores the voice crack and pulls him in by the jaw, pressing their foreheads together.

"Not alone," she repeats, more intense. His tears drip off the end of her nose. "It'll be ok. It'll be ok." Dustin gives some kind of incredulous, breathless laugh, unable to get the words out. "With you," El whispers. "It'll be ok if it's with you. I'll be with you."

"It's just so *dumb*-"

"It's not," Steve said, cutting him off. "Look, I- I get it, ok? Like…" he gestured at the room around them, smiling wryly. "My parents are barely here. I've got one friend my age. Not that I don't love you guys, but you're all high schoolers, and it's just… it's different. We don't see the world the same yet. It's really fucking hard not to…" he took a deep breath. "It's hard not to hate everything. I get it, Dusty, ok? It's like… it's like…" he waved his hands kind of vaguely in the air.

"Like, everything's bad anyway," Max says. She's shifted a little closer. "And it's like you don't really hate everything, not all the time. But everything's empty and you don't know what else to say about it. You don't know how to describe it without saying you hate it, because you don't know what you're feeling but you don't want to

feel it. So you hate everything. The world and the empty feeling and yourself." Her face is steely, but her eyes are sad.

El's grip on him tightens. "And you're not just empty," she says quietly, in this tiny voice that makes Dustin's heart twist, stretching and popping and bleeding in his chest, because *God*, she sounds so small. "You're not… not sad. You think you're sad. You're crying, so you must be sad, but really you're just… mad. You're mad. And you hate being mad. It hurts to be mad. You don't know… why. Or at what. It's just… there." She's trembling against him, just a little. "And it hurts," she repeats, her voice dripping tears, and Dustin's chest tightens painfully at the twist of her eyebrows.

Mike's voice is shaking. "It hurts like hell," he agrees, reaching over to clutch El's hand. "It's like it hurts… it hurts so bad that nothing else matters. It hurts so bad you don't matter. It's like no matter what you do, you're just... you're just this mess, this fucking… compilation of all the things that are hurting you, but they're all in your head. It's just you." His voice cracks sharply. "It's just you."

"And it hurts," Dustin echoes. His eyes are burning again. "It hurts, and then you just… you don't know, you just want…" he stares down at his hands. His throat stings with what he's trying to say, but the words are stuck. They won't come out, no matter what he wills, they're just stuck, but his heart is hammering and he feels sick.

Max's hand grips his knee. "You want it to be over," she says plainly. "You don't know what it is, but you want it to end."

"So you want to die." El's voice is stronger- still raw and bleeding, like skin rent apart to expose bone, but intensely certain. "Because what else… what else stops it?" He looks slowly back up at her, their eyes meeting. It's silent in the sitting room. El presses her forehead against his again and whispers, "I love you." Her tears drip down his cheeks.

Lucas's hand cards through his hair again, his arm sliding around El's shoulders in a kind of hug, his chin propping atop Dustin's head. Max buries her face in his knee. He can feel her breathing, slow and steady. Will has a hand on El's back, rubbing it softly, but he's hooked a hand around the back of Mike's neck and tugged him close,

their legs tangling together. Steve's knee presses solidly against his shoulder.

He doesn't feel okay. He doesn't feel better, even. But he does feel like the part inside of him that's always screaming, that thrashes wildly and kicks into his mind at night, that inferno in his gut that feels like it's melting his organs away and leaving him agonizingly hollow, has been killed for just a minute. El's hand is clutching his cheek and Lucas is playing with the ends of his hair and Max has tilted her head up to look at him. To smile at him, even though it's half-drowned in everything else they feel. For a minute, it doesn't matter what he hates. It matters what he loves.

He loves them.

"Why the *fuck* did we pick the sport that practices in summer?" Max falls into step beside him, scowling. She'd cut her hair to her shoulders a few months ago, and it's messily half tied back, a few strands dangling in her face. Dustin reaches out, brushing them away.

He shrugs. "The hell of it?" he answers drily. She wrinkles her nose in response, obviously unsatisfied. "Because leg muscles are sexy?"

She considers that for a moment before nodding decisively. "You're right."

"What's he right about?" Her friend asks, appearing on her other side. Her name is pretty, Hanna or something, and Dustin was in Spanish with her once, but they've only spoken a handful of times. She has the look of a track runner, all long legs and arms outlined with muscle and faint freckles across her nose that speak of time in the sun. She's from the South somewhere, Louisiana or Alabama or somewhere like that, and her voice has the tinge of a drawl that makes it easy to listen to. She's got long eyelashes, too, dark and framing dark eyes, and delicately boned hands that are always moving, fluttering or tapping or tucking her hair away behind her ear. She's pretty, which makes her hard to talk to.

"Leg muscles are sexy," Dustin repeats before he loses his nerve.

Hannah laughs, thank the Lord, but they're reaching the stadium before she actually replies. Dustin gives them a salute before jogging over the fence, where the boys are slumped haphazardly. The girls always get to do their warm up laps first, because Coach is sexist and thinks they run out of energy quicker.

James is on the ground, his head on his knees, and Troy is next to him, humming some trashy pop song and sprinkling dirt over James's head. Andy is watching them with bored, half-lidded eyes, clearly unenthralled. Graham is stretching his legs, Freddie is hooking himself into the chain link with his fingers and toes to hang there like Jesus or some shit- no offence to Jesus, Dustin just likes Freddie more.

It's still always a little weird when Troy waves, but he'd apologised time and time again (Dustin suspected Steve had finally done something to set him straight, but he didn't pry) and considering they'd ended up spending a disproportionate amount of time with each other, they'd settled their shit and moved on. Sort of. Dustin still likes being just a bit of a pain, so he waves back and then kicks Troy lightly in the chest.

"Ow!" Troy grabs his ankle and yanks, snorting as Dustin yelps loudly. He lets go before Dustin falls, but still glares. "That hurt, bitch."

Dustin huffs, flopping down on the ground. "You hurt my eyes." Troy raises his eyebrows and drops the next handful of dirt on Dustin. "Ugly *traitor*-"

"Who am I betr-"

"Troy," James hissed, opening one eye. "Shut the hell up." Troy puts up his hands with a sarcastic muttered apology. James smacks his arm. Troy smacks him back, and they devolve into a weird kind of half wrestling match that James very easily wins without really moving. Troy looks displeased. As compensation, Dustin drops some dirt on him. This doesn't make Troy look any more pleased, mysteriously.

There is the sharp blow of a whistle, and the boys jerk to attention.

Coach claps his hands twice. "Alright! Up and on it, boys! I'm sensing a good practice today! I'm keeping you here 'til I'm good and satisfied, so you better be on your toes and ready to run!"

The summer heat makes them lazy, though, and it's nearly six in the fucking evening before he finally calls it a day. Dustin stumbles back to his car from the track, fumbling for his keys and muttering darkly to himself. "Fucking *hell*." He pouts dramatically as Troy passes by, wiggling his arms pointedly. "I feel like jelly," he whines irritably, trying to garner sympathy.

Troy pouts back. "I feel like someone cut my legs off." James rolls his eyes goodnaturedly (probably. It's hard to tell with him, sometimes.) and swings his keys around his fingers. Troy lifts a foot to hang limply in the air. "I'm falling apart," he says, half as a sigh. "I'm going to m- *James!"* James has swung him up and over his shoulder- fairly easily, although Troy wasn't very tall, and honestly Dustin could probably pick him up too- and started for his car.

"James!" Troy exclaims again, kicking at him, but James just laughs at him. Dustin snorts, shaking his head, and fumbles with the car door again.

He's interrupted again almost immediately, this time from a shout across the parking lot. "Wait, Dustin!" Rapid footsteps echo behind him, and he turns just in time for Max to skid into his chest and knock the breath out of him. "Oh shit, shit, are you good?" Dustin pulls her back by her shoulders so that he can see her face- honestly, having Max pressed up against him was nice, but it's eighty degrees and he just ran approximately seven and a half miles, so maybe later. "Sorry." She pats his hand. "Hanna has to stop by her dad's store on the way home, can you give me a lift?"

Dustin narrows his eyes at her, pretending to debate, even though they both know he'll say yes. "You wanna drive?" he offers. "My legs are killing me."

Max scoffs and circles around the passenger seat. "I'll drive this fucker on a cold day in Hell, Henderson. Now get in."

Dustin tsks his tongue disapprovingly, shaking his head, but slides

dutifully in the driver's seat. "Right now it's not a cold day anywhere," he mutters. Max, thankfully, does not correct him on this "fact". She just snorts and starts to rifle through his tapes. "Jesus, Mayfield," he grumbles. "It's not even that far to your house."

Max glances out the window. "Keep driving."

"Huh?" Dustin gives her as good of a pitifully confused look as he can while still watching the road. Max rolls her eyes and keeps rifling.

"I said keep driving, Dustin."

He keeps driving.

They pass Max's house as Joan Jett starts to filter through the tinny little speakers, and she wrinkles her nose but mouths along with the words. Dustin has started humming by the time they pass the soda shop, the one Hanna's dad owns. The song has switched over to Queen by the time they approach the Harrington's- Max rolls down the window down as she sees it coming up and unbuckles her seatbelt, leaning out as far as she could and blatantly ignoring Dustin's exclamation of horror. "Hey, assholes!" she yells. In the driveway, James and Troy glance up in time to see her flip them off, grinning widely. James yells something indistinct back, and Troy returns the gesture with both hands and a laugh. Dustin shakes his head as she pulls back in.

"You're an idiot, Maxine," he says sternly. She leans over and pokes the corner of his mouth.

"You're smiling," she singsongs. "You think I'm funny."

"Absolutely not. Seatbelt, dumbass."

She huffs, but obeys before she turns the music up. Dustin gives her a look of fake reprimand before rolling his window down too and accelerating. Max whoops loudly. "That's what I'm talkin' about!" The wind is blowing her hair wildly about, but he can still see her smile. He can still see all her freckles. He can still see the way her eyes are shining, fixed on him. Fixed just on him.

"You've got a dimple," he remarks, looking back at the road before he

crashes his car over Max Mayfield's pretty eyes.

"What?"

He reaches over and pokes it lightly. "You've got a dimple," he repeats. "Just the one, though." Max blinks. "It's cute," he adds, in case she's offended.

Max blinks again. "Oh. Thank you." She's grinning again, but it's smaller. It feels more intimate, somehow.

Dustin looks away and speeds up again.

Oldbrook is the closest town to Hawkins, and in all honesty, it's not much different. It's small, it's trashy, it's mostly suburbs, and the mayor is an asshole with an ugly haircut. It used to have a sign alongside the road, but someone crashed into it with a pickup three years ago and it's still lying on the ground. The roads are all shitty gravel, too, because apparently nobody knows how to fucking pave, and they have a sign in the front yard of 305 Reindeer Path because in 1914 some cult pulled a mass suicide there and that's the last interesting thing that happened.

They've got Whizzy's, though, and that makes them a little better than Hawkins. Benny's isn't bad, and Brick's is almost good sometimes, but those are the only two places worth eating, really, and Whizzy's is like God in comparison. They've got *real* milkshakes, like ones that actually taste good and don't melt in five minutes. They also have good fries according to the girl Graham said Andy said Troy said James said he might be kind of dating by homecoming (Dustin still doesn't know her name, but she has cute bangs?) but it's the milkshakes that are in popular demand at Hawkins High.

Dustin skids slightly as he parks, but he doesn't have time to be ashamed before Max is pulling him out. It's nearly half past- damn, he really had been speeding, hadn't he?- but the sun is still bright above the treeline. Fucking summer.

Max points him to a table when they get inside, her face unnaturally stern. "Sit. Stay," she instructs, watching him carefully until he sits down. He raises an eyebrow, but Max just nods approvingly and

heads up to the counter. Dustin sighs, leaning forward on his hands. Outside there are some kids playing on the curb, about nine or ten. Playing? Arguing? Both, probably. Dustin's never met a ten year old that didn't bite. One of them is yelling vehemently at his friend, stamping his feet and pointing fingers, the whole shebang. It's almost impressive how red his face is turning. He catches the tail end of the screaming as the door creaks open for another guest.

"Because he fucking pushed me, that's why-"

Max slides in across the booth from him, three milkshakes in tow. Dustin raises an eyebrow. "We got company?" he asks, curious. Max throws him a disdainful look.

"No, *Dusty-Bun."* It's amazing how scathing she can be even as a smile twitches onto her face. "These-" she slid the vanilla and- Jesus, what the hell is that? It's bright purple. Dustin is wary of purple food.- the purple one towards herself. "-are mine. This-" she passes him the chocolate with a wrinkle of her nose, "- is yours."

Dustin takes a sip and sighs loudly, satisfied. "Ah, the good ol' Whizzy's dazzle," he says dreamily, stirring it slowly.

Max splutters on her mystery milkshake as she laughs. "Ol' razzle dazzle," she agrees. Her tongue is already purple.

Dustin suddenly aches for his tongue to be purple too.

Dustin suddenly can't breathe very well.

Max is still laughing, the sun caught in the branches of the trees outside and leaking gold into her hair. She'd scraped it up into a haphazard ponytail after the second hour of practise, and it's all frazzled and bumpy and falling out around her face. Her summer tan is thick- it will be until nearly Christmas, he knows, because Max's tans take forever to fade- and it's brought the freckles out along her cheeks, along her neck. They're all over her shoulders, too. Dustin can't see those right now, though, because she's wearing a t-shirt. An old blue t-shirt.

Lucas's t-shirt.

Dustin takes another sip of his milkshake and listens to Max laugh, because it's the prettiest sound he's ever heard, and then he steals a sip of her milkshake as she's trying the vanilla. It's cherry, as it turns out.

"Ok, but why the hell is it purple?" he's still asking as they leave. They're stumbling a little bit- turns out sitting for hours on overworked legs doesn't do wonders for the joints. Who knew? (Them, because they do it everytime, and then they always complain the next day about the ache. It's tradition, because they're idiots.)

"It's not *real cherries*, Dustin," Max is saying, sounding oddly disappointed in him. She's still grinning, though, so he can't feel bad. "It's just flavoring."

"What, so it's fucking neon purple?" Dustin scoffs. He opens the car door for her. She curtsies for him, giggling. "That's fucking ugly. Should've used a different flavoring." He starts the car. He almost forgets the headlights, which don't really matter that much in a place like Oldbrook where you can't drive above twenty without skidding, but he remembers at the last moment.

"I doubt they picked it for its color, Henderson. Damn, what time is it?" Max checks her watch and whistles. "We were there for three and a half hours?"

Dustin barks out a laugh, pressing down on the accelerator as he navigates out onto the main road. "That's a new record, I think. How fast do you think I can get back?"

"Nah. First meet last year. You, me, Andy, Sarah, and Lane. That was like, six hours." Mischief sparks into her eye. "I bet you can get above seventy out here."

"No fucking way we were there for six hours," he rebukes. "No fucking way."

"Yes fucking way."

"Nuh uh."

"Yuh h- *I didn't say ninety, Dustin!*"

Dustin speeds up, grinning even wider, and Max keeps yelling, but she's also leaning out the window, and the wind is fucking up her hair. Her shirt is flying up over her stomach. She has freckles there, too.

Lucas's shirt.

Dustin decides it's better if he doesn't recognise it for now.

Notes for the Chapter:

> it's called culture look it up
>
> yes. it was a vine reference. it happens when ur as dumb as me

3. a world apart, but they don't make a sound

Summary for the Chapter:

> "dustin and mike. give them their rights" -wyatt, 2k20
>
> chapter title is from "i love you more than you will ever know" by never shout never

Notes for the Chapter:

> i wrote this with a fever and im posting it with a panic attack what a fucking icon

"Hey, can we talk?"

The words themselves aren't terribly shocking. Mike's always been a talker. He can't leave things unsaid for his life- it's a special talent, being as much an emotional rollercoaster as Mike Wheeler. Nobody else has ever gotten it quite right, in Dustin's opinion. In any case, he's not very surprised by Mike's question. He's only surprised by the timing.

His mouth opens and closes a few times, and finally he manages a weak, "how did you get in my house?" that Mike apparently chooses to ignore.

"Can we talk?" he asks again, and Dustin is trying really hard to be annoyed, but Mike looks desperate, and Dustin wants to be a good friend. Dustin hasn't always been a very good friend. (And it's not that Mike *has*, necessarily, but grudges never helped anyone, and Dustin would rather leave it in the past than settle petty scores.)

So he sighs and scoots over, patting the comforter next to him. "Sure, man. What's up?"

Mike doesn't say anything for a while. He settles in carefully, like it's consecrated ground, and folds his legs all slow and awkward. Like he's forgotten how exactly he's meant to do it. Dustin doesn't press him. He just watches, taking him in, studying him as best he can in

the dim light. Mike Wheeler. He's not dressed for bed- he's got on basketball shorts that don't fit quite right anymore, old grey ones that Dustin remembers him wearing for gym in middle school. No wonder they're too small. Those were good days, back when he and Mike were the same height. (The thought is funnier than it ought to be.) The sweater, a bright red one that comes all the way down over his hands, is newer; Dustin remembers the first time he saw Mike wear it. It was one of the worst days of his life.

"I remember first time you wore that," he says. Mike glances down at the sweater and blinks.

"Oh." Recognition flashes across his face, followed by a wince. "Oh, I didn't-"

"I know," Dustin interrupts, and laughs. It's not very amused, but Mike's answering smile isn't very happy, so that's alright. "There's no reason you would." He waits in silence again as Mike adjusts into the space. It seems far too small for him. (Everything has always been too small for Mike Wheeler.)

Mike lets out a held breath after another moment, scrubbing his hand over his face sharply. "I'm a fucking moron," he mutters to himself, and Dustin raises his eyebrows in response. Mike sighs again. "It's-" he glances away. The window is still open. The streetlamp is casting shadows over his face. "It was stupid to come here." His voice is fragile.

Dustin shifts a little so that he's facing him. "Mike." He reaches out. "Hey, asshole, give me your hand." Mike snorts, but obliges, slipping his fingers into Dustin's. Dustin squeezes. "You can say whatever you need to say," he promises quietly. "You already know way too much about me anyway, so it's only fair, right?" Mike laughs, but the sound is weak. "Besides," he continues, even softer. "You're my friend."

"And you're okay with that?" Dustin opens his mouth to answer, but Mike rushes on. "I mean, I know we hang out all the time and shit and I missed you a lot and I know you know I'm sorry, but like…" Mike shrugs helplessly. His eyes are glittering through the dark, and Dustin has always thought Mike's eyes look like they can see everything, but right now they just look empty. "I don't know. I was

talking to Jane about school next year, and I just…" His knees bounce awkwardly up and down like a weird bony butterfly. They do that when he's nervous. "School's going to start soon. And I need to know that you're okay with… this." He gestures between the two of them with his free hand. "That you're okay with being my friend." He looks guilty.

"Why wouldn't I be okay with it?" Dustin squeezes his hand again. Mike's nose twitched. "What, just because some assholes talk behind your back?"

"Some of those assholes are your friends," Mike points out, his voice suddenly even softer. "I don't want you to lose your friends."

"What, like you didn't want me to lose my teeth?" Mike flinches hard and Dustin holds his hand tighter in response. "I would rather lose them than you. I already lost you once." It's a clichè, cheesy line, but it works. Mike scrubs at his eyes with his palm, taking in a shaky breath. "Come on Wheeler, don't make me hug you."

"Asshole," Mike replies, but there's no heat behind it. His hand falls back into his lap. Dustin reaches out to hold that one, too, and Mike laughs quietly but allows it. There's a thick silence before he speaks again. "You were my best friend." (That's not true. Dustin has never been anyone's best friend, except maybe briefly Max's before Hanna and Gabbie and Lane came along. But it's a pretty sentiment, and Dustin knows Mike will deny the truth anyway, so he just smiles.) "And I…" Mike takes another of those weird, trembling breaths and stares at the wall behind Dustin's head. "I feel… guilty," he says slowly, his brow furrowing. Dustin doesn't know if they should be having this conversation at two in the morning. Dustin doesn't know when else they could possibly have it. (In truth, Dustin doesn't know much of anything.) He waits patiently for Mike to continue. "I shouldn't have acted the way I did."

Dustin gives another sad laugh. That's pretty much the only kind of laugh he can manage recently. "You were an asshole," he agrees. Mike snorts.

"Not sure asshole covers it," he mutters, squeezing Dustin's hands. It feels nice. "I shouldn't have… well. You know."

Dustin does know, but all of the sudden he feels incredibly tired of this. He's done dancing around this. He's done enough avoidance in the past three years that he deserves a goddamn award, and maybe it's selfish, but he wants to hear Mike own up to it this time. "Shouldn't have what?" And it's sharper than intended, but Mike doesn't look hurt. He just swallows hard. He probably gets it. He used to get it, at least, but that was a long time ago.

His voice is quiet. "I shouldn't have hit you." His eyes flick to Dustin's for half a second before they fix back on the wall. "I shouldn't have judged you for what you chose. I shouldn't have, like, projected my anger onto you or whatever the fuck my mom says." He licks his lips awkwardly, tugging his hands away to drum his fingers on his knees, and then the words all come tumbling out again, faster than before, like if he doesn't say them then he'll lose them altogether, and Dustin listens. (Dustin always listens. Mike's always been a talker.) "I should have been happy for you when you made baseball and supported you and come to watch your games and I should have helped you with chemistry and apologised for being an asshole and quoted comics at you to make you laugh and kept my radio and celebrated your birthday and all that shit friends are supposed to do. I should have been your friend. I should have. I was supposed to be. I… I promised. And I knew I was being a bitch. I knew it." He says it all in one breath, so rapidly that Dustin can barely understand, but he listens anyway. "I also knew that I was upset, though, and- and angry, and sad, and I felt like you were betraying me, even though *I* was the one being an asshole. And I missed Will and Jane a lot but like, that was never your fault, so it was super fucking dumb to take it out on you. And now… now I know that, like, you've been feeling that same way? The fucking-" he moves his head in some vague gesture. "The mad-sad way we talked about on Friday. And I took it out on you and that wasn't fair." He bites his lips awkwardly. "And I'm sorry for spray painting your locker sophomore year," he confesses. "And your car. And for changing the answers on your physics tests when it was my turn to collect them. And for breaking the lead off your pencils when you left the room. And for stealing your fake ID out of your wallet."

Dustin blinks, because, uh, holy shit.

"You stole my fake ID?" and Mike pulls it out of his pocket and offers

it tentatively, like a peace offering. Dustin snorts, shaking his head in disbelief. "Damn, Wheeler." He doesn't know exactly how to reply, so he just leans over to set the ID on his bedside table. Mike's fingers are still tapping away at his jeans. Mike's always been fidgety. Dustin sighs, rearranging himself so that he can look Mike straight in the eyes. "I forgive you."

It's oddly cathartic to say. Or maybe it's just cathartic to see the way Mike's shoulders relax when he does. Either way, Dustin can't help but smile.

"I'm sorry for punching Troy," Mike adds in belatedly, and Dustin laughs. It's not sad this time.

"Pretty sure I'm not the one you owe an apology, buddy." Mike's nose wrinkles suddenly and sharply. "Hey, I didn't say you had to! Don't give me that look!"

"Ok, *Mom*," Mike replies, rolling his eyes, and then they're both laughing way too loud for this time of night. Dustin's mom is definitely going to hear them. He wonders briefly if she will recognise Mike's laugh, but decides it doesn't matter. What matters is that he has his best friend back. And his fake ID. He's still reeling a little bit from that. The laughter lulls after a minute, and Mike's eyes flicker to the wall again. "I thought he had stolen you from me," he admits lowly. Dustin's voice sits heavy in his throat.

"I was already gone."

"I know." Their eyes meet, and it feels like it's supposed to this time, like Mike can see all the way through him. It's weirdly comforting, although Dustin hates it when anyone else looks at him like that.

Aidan looked at him like that. Aidan was a weird kid, though.

Dustin's eyes sting.

"Shit." Mike's hands fly out to grab his again. "Shit, Henderson, I'm sorry-" He looks frantic. Mike has always been a pioneer of self blame.

Dustin shakes his head, forcing out a smile. "No, it's not- it's not you.

It's-" Mike doesn't know about Aidan. Dustin has never wanted to talk about it. Dustin doesn't want to talk about it now either, actually, so he just breathes in and out as steadily as he can and rubs his thumbs over Mike's knuckles. "I'm ok." He's definitely crying a little bit, but it's like two thirty, so he's justified. What are a few tears between friends, after all?

"Ok." Mike smiles thinly back at him. He doesn't press.

They fall back into silence, but it's not heavy. It's a soft kind of silence. It's as cathartic as their conversation, plus a million times less likely to make Dustin have a meltdown in his own fucking bed. The wind drifts in through the window. Dustin should probably start locking it, but sometimes Freddie will stop by at three or four or five with pot and physics questions, and Dustin likes Freddie. He's nothing like Mike or Lucas or Will, but Dustin's come to accept that no one is like Mike or Lucas or Will, and in all honesty he'd rather they weren't. It was a resignation at first; he doesn't have to live with resignations anymore, though, so he watches the wind move through Mike's hair and waits for his smile to relax into authenticity.

"I'm not like Troy."

He's whispering again. Dustin feels the urge to roll his eyes, but he represses it and squeezes Mike's hands again instead, because it's two thirty in the morning and he loves his petty, dramatic, kleptomaniac best friend. "You don't even know Troy," he points out, and Mike's nose twitches again. It's funny when it does that. Will always gets a weird look on his face. (Dustin thinks, sometimes, that it might be a two way street, the love thing. But he's not sure.)

"No, I don't," Mike finally says. His voice has dropped even lower. "But I-" he swallows. "I know he's not… like me."

Dustin's eyebrows wrinkle. "If this is about the shit Andy says," he starts carefully, and Mike twitches. "Don't bother. Andy's a fucking liar, everyone knows it." Mike lets out a shaky laugh. "I know he's wrong about you, okay?" Dustin says, as gently as he can.

Mike closes his eyes tightly. "Okay, but… what if he's not?" he whispers. Dustin opens his mouth, but he's interrupted again. "Not

about… everything. But what if…" he trails off, and then opens his eyes. They're hollow again. "Will is taller than me, did you notice?" His tone is forcibly light. Strained.

Will.

Suddenly, Dustin thinks he might know what's going on, and he breathes out a sigh of relief. He's much more equipped to deal with this than Mike's insecurities. He squeezes his friend's hands and scoots closer. "Yeah, I did. Only, like, an inch, though."

"Two," Mike corrects. Dustin accepts this, because Mike has a history of being the Encyclopedia Of Will Byers. "It, uh… I don't know. God, this was stupid." There's a pause that hovers tensely between the two of them. "I guess what I'm saying is-"

Dustin is the one to interrupt this time. "Me too," he says, too quick and too loud, and Mike looks startled. "Sorry. I-" he clears his throat. "Not Will. Just…" They're staring at each other again. They don't usually stare at each other. This is weird. "I stole this shirt from Freddie," he says, because he needs to say something. "Rosling."

"Freddie Rosling," Mike repeats, dumbfounded.

"Freddie Rosling."

Mike whistles. "Damn, okay." His lips are twitching. "And here I thought you were James's competition." Dustin raises his eyebrows, and Mike laughs out loud. He hasn't heard Mike laugh like that in a while- earlier, it was borderline hysterical, an impossibly stressed sort of thing. This isn't stressed. This is gentle. "Allie, dude! She's, like, obsessed with you."

Dustin risks sounding like an asshole to ask, "Who?" and Mike just laughs harder, because Mike is a dick. "Dude!" He smacks his shoulder lightly. "I'm *sorry*, I'm dumb!"

Mike shakes his head, grinning widely. "God, you're such an asshole jock now," he says in lieu of a real answer. Dustin gasps dramatically. "The girl Hagan's screwing around with? Come on, don't you guys hang out?"

"The girl with cute bangs?" Dustin tries. Mike tilts his head, thinking. "She's, like, Troy height, dude, I can't see that far away." He earns a laugh that makes him grin stupidly wide. "And, like…" he thinks about the two freckles below Max's left rib. "Not her, but…" he sighs. "Girls."

Mike just laughs again. "That's fair. I've never really…" his nose twitches again. It's kind of cute. Maybe Will's on the right track. "Yeah, not, uh… not my thing."

"Damn." Dustin tsks his tongue. "For a couple of queers, we sure are good at avoiding the word."

There's something very special about making your best friend laugh, he decides. He's never appreciated it fully before. Two years ago, he reflects wryly, he couldn't have dreamed of enjoying Mike Wheeler's laugh. But two years ago, Dustin *was* just some asshole jock, and Mike Wheeler was the certified freak of Hawkins High that it was easier to pretend he didn't know. Two years ago, Mike was spray painting "go to hell" on his locker in big red letters and Dustin was failing chemistry because he couldn't find a tutor.

He wants to say he's sorry for that. He wants to say he's glad Mike came back. He wants to say that he'd rather walk into the Upside Fucking Down then let his best friend leave again. But the words stick awkwardly to the inside of his throat, and instead, all he says is, "I think I have some extra pajama pants. Those can't be comfortable," but when Mike gets up he locks the window, and in some weird way Dustin thinks he gets it.

He rolls over to let Mike change, but he peels the comforter back until he slips in beside him. It should probably be weird to sleep like this, especially after what they've just admitted to each other, but it's not. It's not Mike Wheeler, the gay freak from school. It's Mike Wheeler, his best friend, and Dustin falls asleep grinning.

"One Byers to the other, huh?"

"You better watch that fucking mouth."

Notes for the Chapter:

my 5 subscribers out here like what the fuck is he doing . and that's valid

4. please save all your questions for the end

Summary for the Chapter:

> "I'm glad you guys are friends."
>
> Dustin likes having friends. Usually. He usually likes having friends.

Notes for the Chapter:

> chapter title is from "pancakes for dinner" by lizzie mcalpine
>
> yeah this was meant to have more plot but i spent 1000 words on dustin pining and it was going to be disproportionately long if i kept going so. have some more tender thoughts on hands

"Morning, sunshine!" Dustin groans, scrubbing a hand over his face, and tilts his head slowly to regard his friend.

"Morning, Mike," he mumbles. Mike just grins back. Mike doesn't grin very often; this is disconcerting. "Did something good happen?"

Mike rolls his eyes, but it's gentler than normal. "Can't I smile at my own best friend?" he asks, and turns to get off the bed quickly enough that he doesn't catch Dustin's face growing disgustingly fond. He's got to get his shit together. Jesus. He lets Mike borrow some clothes- black sweatpants and an old black Star Wars shirt because God forbid the man wear any color- and pretends not to hear him snicker when he notices the 16 emblazoned on the side of the sweats. (16 was Freddie Rosling's baseball number. Dustin is beginning to regret spilling that particular secret.) Mike, never well adjusted to being ignored, begins, "So were you guys, like-"

"No." Dustin pulls on a hideous striped button-up, black and green and yellow, that he only bought because seeing it makes Troy look physically ill. Mike looks delighted by it, naturally. "We just…" he lowers his voice to a mumble. "You know."

Mike is awful at discretion. “You fucked?”

Dustin tries not to laugh. He really, really does. “Yeah, but it was like… a three-time thing. He only comes over for pot now.” Mike rolls his eyes again. Dustin decides to be offended. But like, in his head, because Mike is funny and all, but he remembers pretty damn clearly what it’s like to have that fist on his eye, and he’s wary of pissing him off. (Andy says Mike isn’t stable. Dustin pushes that little voice away. Andy’s full of shit, anyway.)

“‘It was like a three-time thing’,” Mike mocks in a high pitched voice. “But you kept a bunch of his clothes and you say his name all dreamy.” Dustin spins around, gaping in affront.

“I do *not* sound dreamy!” Mike hums noncommittedly, crossing his arms. “I do not! Take it back!” He snatches up a sock and holds it threateningly. “Bastard!”

Mike doesn’t look very intimidated by Dustin’s choice of weapon, and he just shrugs. “I don’t know, Henderson. You’re sounding a bit like Jennifer Hayes these- hey!” The sock slaps him across the cheek, and Dustin freezes for a moment. Mike’s face is frozen in an expression he can’t quite read. *Shit.*

But Mike just sticks out his tongue and says, “Lover boy,” so Dustin shrieks and hits him with the sock again. Mike dodges it with offensive ease and jumps back with a cackle that Dustin hasn’t heard in years. It’s a brief moment of chasing before Mike gets the door open and scrambles out into the hall, Dustin on his heels all the way down the stairs, waving the sock in the air.

“*Damn* you, Wheeler-”

Mike stops short just outside the kitchen, and Dustin stumbles into him, knocking both of them forward. There’s another shriek and a loud “fuck!” before they’re both on the floor and someone is laughing. It’s too high pitched to be Mike, so who- oh, right. Dustin sighs, his head falling onto the back of Mike’s shoulder, and mumbles an ashamed, “Hey, Mom,” that only makes her laugh harder. Mike is starting to make weird half aborted snorting noises too, but Dustin strongly suspects those are due to the shame in his voice.

“Do either of you want breakfast?” Claudia asks, her voice still amused. “I made waffles. They’re not award-winning, but it was a box mix and there’s syrup, so I think it’s okay.”

Dustin sighs, rolling off Mike so that they can get up and dust themselves off. Tews is perched on her counter, watching judgementally. He sticks out his tongue at her. “Mike eats his waffles with honey,” he answers automatically, briefly surprised he remembers.

His mom blinks. “Oh. What the hell, Mike?”

For some reason, that’s the funniest thing the boys have heard since Freddie Rosling, and Dustin has to double over, literally choking, before he can compose himself. His mother looks a little concerned.

“Yeah, anyway.” He collapses at the table, dragging Mike into the seat next to him. “Uh, we were supposed to go over to Steve’s today. Seeing the Byers off.” His mom passes them two plates and puts the honey on the table, taking a sip of margarita. “Will said they were leaving at, like, noon? So we were going to hang out for a little bit before they do.” Claudia gives a heavy mock sigh.

“Leaving me all by myself again,” she replies mournfully. She has a little pink umbrella in her drink. “All alone. No one here to keep my company.”

Dustin gives her a flat stare. “Call the boy.”

She sighs again. “He’s out of town.” Dustin knocks the honey out of Mike’s hand, staring at the drenched waffle in horror, before he looks back at his mom.

“Call the sequel,” he suggests, still equally monotone. Claudia, her mournful face unbudging, takes a long sip of her margarita before she replies.

“He’s at work. Oh, don’t let him stop you, honey, use as much as you want. Only I can judge you.” The woman with a Star Trek shirt and a morning margarita is apparently not very intimidating, because Mike immediately resumes his heresy.

Dustin pauses, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Wait. Why don't you have work?"

Claudia apparently decides to ignore him. "So, who's going to be at Steve's?" she asks, mostly addressing Mike. He's finally set the honey aside, thankfully. "I don't even know who the crew is these days." Dustin knows she doesn't mean it harshly, but his heart twists awkwardly anyway. He sets his fork down.

Mike clicks his tongue. "Honestly, we barely do either. Uh… me, you, the twins, Lucas, Max. Robin is coming, think." He pauses. "Is Troy going to be home?"

"Uh," Dustin replies eloquently. He can't think of much except how it was one thing when they were laughing in his room last night, but now that Mike is *here*, sitting at his table, eating bits of honey-soaked waffle off his knife, making small talk with his mom, it's all just a shade too foreign, like when he used lemon instead of lime for a tequila shot. It wasn't awful. It was just off-axis. "I think James stayed over, so probably." James almost always stays over, so it seems like a good bet. "He never comes downstairs when Steve has people over, though." Mike stares at him intently for a moment before nodding.

"Right." And that's that, and Dustin tries not to look confused, because weakness is never attractive.

Claudia finishes her drink and stands, heading for the counter. "That sounds lovely!" Dustin picks at his waffles a little more, ignoring the way Mike's gaze fixes on his hands sharply. "Are you picking Max up, Dusty?" his mom continues obliviously, finishing up mixing a new margarita. "Oh, do either of you want- wait, I can't give you these." She frowns momentarily, then pulls down two more glasses. "Just a little bit is fine," she murmurs to herself, although it's not exactly a little. "I assumed it was her when I heard you laughing last night. He doesn't laugh like that with many people," she adds, handing Mike his drink. "It's nice to hear." Dustin stares into his glass, as if he can hide from the way Mike is looking at him- a smirk, he's sure, or some kind of smug quirk to his eyebrows. "I'm going to call the knock-off," Claudia decides, then sweeps out of the room in all her Star-Trek-pajama-ed glory. Mike laughs a little under his breath.

"Who's the knock off?"

Dustin chances a glance up at him. "Jamie." The look on Mike's face catches him by surprise- it's kinder than he expected. Soft, almost. Mike isn't soft very often. Dustin looks away. "Uh, I'm gonna call Max."

Mike glances at his plate. "Are you gonna finish breakfast? Or like… start?" Dustin just shrugs, pushing his chair back. He pretends he can't feel Mike's eyes on his back as he walks away.

--

Dustin leaves the car idling on the curb as he heads up the front path, whistling. He pauses at the front steps, glances around- oh, there's Ms Grey from next door. He nods politely at her before jumping up on the railing and heaving himself up onto the roof. (It's a lot easier than it used to be, and he reflects for a moment, pleased.) He crawls up to Max's window and raps on the glass gently. She scrambles over to pull it open, her face torn between a reprimand and a grin.

God, Dustin will never get tired of looking at Max. She's got her hair in two braids; the way they curl forward against her shoulders makes him want to tug them, all gentle, tug her in close enough to- nope, ok, next train of thought.

"-you're so stupid-"

He recognizes absently that he's being chastised, but the next train of thought has already rocketed out from the station, and he's far too caught up in the freckle that's situated just under her left eye to care. *She's pretty*, he thinks, kind of hazily, and she has on that chapstick she loves, the one that tints her lips just a bit. He wonders in a momentary fever if it tastes like cherry.

"-people are going to see you-"

She's grabbing his hand. She's trying to tug him inside, and he knows he should, because Ms Grey next door won't tell anyone but there's nothing to say for the other neighbors; Max's hand is so nice, though, long fingers and short nails, always softer than he expects, and he

gets caught up staring at it for a moment.

"Dustin, get the hell inside."

He jolts at the sudden panic in her voice and scrambles to oblige. He's such a fucking idiot. God, he hopes no one saw him. If Neil finds out and Max gets hurt-

Shit. He's so stupid.

Max squeezes his hand for another moment before she lets go. "Hey, it's okay," she whispers. His sudden wash of self hatred must have shown on his face. "He's not even awake yet. It's just that Mr Crane leaves soon for work, and he'd yell the goddamn house down if he saw you on my roof." Her hand comes up to touch his cheek. Somehow, that makes everything a little better. "It's okay."

Dustin lets out a long, slow sigh, his arms winding gently around her waist on instinct. "Okay," he agrees, even if the sick feeling in the back of his throat refuses to subside. "Sorry."

He earns himself a tiny smile. "Don't be. I'm glad you came." He hums in response, leaning his cheek into her hand. Max lets out a little noise sort of like a laugh and ducks her head against his shoulder. "You look tired." Dustin seizes the subject change.

"Late night. Mom and I watched her favorite movie with the sequel last night, and I was haunted by fear of what they might be doing all night long." And also Mike Wheeler. He decides not to mention that.

"The sequel… that's Ben, right?" He nods. Max's nose wrinkles. "He's ugly. She ought to go with the knock off, I think."

Dustin bites back a laugh. "That's what I keep saying!" he agrees, his voice painted with mock exasperation. Max giggles. He momentarily loses his train of thought. "I think she likes the glasses," he finally manages.

Max makes a thoughtful noise and pulls her head back up to regard him carefully. Her gaze slides over his face, hovering on his eyes for a moment too long, and he knows he's imagining that she pauses on his lips, but he can feel himself turning pink anyway. "I guess I get it,"

she says. "You'd look cute in glasses."

"Oh," Dustin replies, sort of squeaky. "Thanks."

She snorts and moves her hand off his cheek, tucking his hair behind his ear. "No problem." Time is slow for a moment; the morning light is soft and Max is smiling and warmth lingers under the skin she brushed, and Dustin can breathe easier than he has in a while. Outside, there's a bird chirping, and it's not as annoying as usual.

Max pats his cheek and steps away. "Ok. I have to get ready." She's still wearing her pajamas, he realises, and flushes a little. She points at the bed. "Sit." He sits. Max goes to rifle through her closet. "I was thinking," she continues, pulling out several articles of clothing that very obviously don't go together and tossing them on the bed next to him, "that I might should dress up a little. But I don't know why I was thinking that." She pulls out a white and red striped blouse, frowns at it, and puts it back.

Dustin shrugs. "I mean, this is about as dressed up as I get, so I can't really be with you on that one, but it's fun to look nice." Max huffs.

"It is fun. But what if everyone else is dressed super casual and I look weird?"

"You won't look weird," he replies automatically. "You'll look pretty." A weird look flashes across Max's face. *Shit*. He scrambles for a way to remedy it. "Uh, Lucas will be there," he says, a bit lamely.

The weird look comes back for a moment, but she also ducks her head, failing to hide the pink flooding her cheeks, so he knows he's hit a bingo. He tries not to let his face fall.

Lucas.

Fuck.

"I mean, I don't need to look nice for Lucas," Max mumbles in reply. Dustin rolls his eyes, and because he's trying to be a good friend, he musters up a reply.

"But you *want* to," he points out. Max opens her mouth, but he cuts

her off. "Uh uh. I might be dumb, but I'm not blind." She huffs again. Her cheeks have darkened. "You don't need to dress up for him, though. You could show up in a hazmat suit and he'd still get all worked up."

Max throws a shoe at him. "He does *not* get worked up over me," she replies snippily, although she's fighting a grin. Dustin raises his eyebrows. "He doesn't!" She crosses her arms, frowning stubbornly.

"He does." Dustin picks through the clothes lying next to him. "What about this? You never wear this." It's a yellow tank top with little black flowers all over. He remembers her buying it to wear to Lane's birthday party two years ago. He also remembers locking himself in Lane's bathroom to have a crisis over how cute his best friend is, so he thinks it'll do for the whole Lucas thing. Max narrows her eyes at it momentarily, but nods.

She gestures for him to turn around. He obliges. There's the sound of rustling fabric monetarily, a pause, and then an annoyed groan. "Dustin."

"Yeah."

She sounds petulant. "I need help." He turns around. Max is standing there with her arms crossed, looking sulky. Max is standing there with her arms crossed, looking sulky, in a tank top and her underwear, because her pajamas have been kicked across the room. Dustin has never really considered whether or not this situation would rocket his blood pressure to concerning levels, but the answer is yes. Also he can't breathe very well. Also, Max has freckles all over her thighs and that's really cute and he kind of wants to trace them all, but he snaps back into it as she keeps talking. "I don't know what to wear with it. I want to look kind of trippy. Since you're wearing the wackiest shirt of all time. We can match."

"Uh," he says, because he's the height of intellectualism.

Max just keeps standing there, and he knows he shouldn't be on the edge of hyperventilating, and he knows that he shouldn't be reacting like this, and he knows she would be uncomfortable if she knew the thoughts running at full speed through his head, but he's a little

behind, so he has to take a deep breath before he can push those aside.

"Dustin?"

He manages a smile. "Just thinking," he replies, and it's only a little strained. Max frowns. "Uh…" he spins on his heel and walks to the closet, mostly so that he doesn't have to look at her looking at him anymore.

"Dustin."

"Max," he replies, but he doesn't turn around, still flipping through the hangers. "Just a sec."

There's another huff. Two arms slide around his waist from behind, and he has to aggressively remind himself that he's her *friend* and he shouldn't be thinking the many, many things he's thinking. Her chin comes to rest on his shoulder. "What are you looking for?"

Dustin narrows his eyes, rifling a moment longer before he finds it. "This. You can look wacky."

Max exclaims delightedly and snatches the skirt from his hand. "You're a genius." It's green and black plaid and it swishes when she moves, which always makes her grin. Max doesn't wear skirts very often; she'd told him once that she doesn't really mind them, but she hates sitting in them for too long, so she doesn't wear them to school.

It's a weird ass outfit. She looks adorable. "Hey!" She points excitedly between them. "Your shirt!"

Dustin glances down. "What about it?" he asks, suddenly concerned. Was there something wrong with it? Why was she bouncing?

"We're coordinated!"

They fucking are, aren't they? Dustin honestly can't decide whether he wants to laugh or cry, so he settles for pressing his lips together and nodding real slow. Max makes the little giggling sound that makes his heart jump and reaches out to grab his hands.

"You're cute," he says without thinking. She doesn't even pause, just rolls her eyes and squeezes his hands tightly for a moment before pointing to the window. "Okay, okay!" He tugs one of her braids lightly. "Bossy."

She wrinkles her nose at him. "Yeah, yeah. I'll put my shoes on and be right down, okay?"

He chambers out semi-awkwardly. Ms Grey is still on her porch, drinking her morning lemonade. She spares him a wave. Dustin attempts one back, but it puts him off balance and he has to grab tightly onto the windowsill again to keep from tumbling over the lip of the roof. He lands on the ground at the same time as Max closes the front door behind her. "My fair lady," he greets, offering his arm. Max rolls her eyes and smacks the back of his head lightly, but accepts the gesture.

Max waves at Ms Grey with a smile as Dustin opens the car door for her. True to form, of course, she wastes no time in looking through his tapes. "Oh, hey!" She pulls out one from the bottom, grinning. "I made this for you!"

He glances over. She's flipping it over in her hand. "It's like, four minutes to Steve's house," he points out. "Do we need music?"

"No." She smiles at him sweetly. "I just like being nosy." Dustin shakes his head, starting the car. Max tucks the tape back away. She pauses. "Oh my God, I didn't see you."

Mike's laugh has always been weird, kind of dark and wheezy, but at ten in the morning when he's stretched out in the backseat of Dustin's car, it's a nice sound. "I was wondering when you would. Almost fell asleep waiting for Dusty to get back."

Max clicks her tongue. "I wouldn't have enlisted him to help me if I knew he had company. He didn't tell me."

"He's not company," Dustin replies flatly. "He's a pain in my ass." Mike laughs again. Max looks away, something like a fond little smile on her face.

Four minutes pass easily, and Dustin tosses the car into park in the yard because James's ugly fucking truck is in the driveway and Steve legally isn't allowed to care. He has to stare at Mike for a full thirty seconds before the bastard finally consents to getting out instead of sprawling in the sunlight that slants through the back windshield. "You're so fucking weird, you know that?" he asks as Mike shakes his curls out.

"He's like a cat," Max reflects, looking thoughtful. "Like, a really funky cat that bites all the time." Mike looks pleased by this description. Dustin makes a mental note to find new friends.

Mike only strengthens the resolve when he kicks the front door open, calling out a loud, "Happy fucking Christmas!" that makes Robin shriek. Dustin let his eyes roll up into his head. Why does he like this guy?

"You're smiling," Max points out. She's doing the thing where she hugs him from behind again, and he has to swallow sharply past the lump in his throat so that he can pull a face at her. "Stop it. I think it's sweet. I'm glad you guys are friends."

Dustin twists away and laces a hand into hers. "Yeah," he says, a little quieter than he meant to. He squeezes her hand. "Yeah, me too."

Notes for the Chapter:

y'all..... i also do not know ok

5. all thoughts hate modern words

Summary for the Chapter:

> Jane worms her way into his life, into his arms, so effortlessly, like there's nowhere else she'd rather be, and he's constantly thanking God for his best friend.
> --
> or; the party for the Byers goes better and worse than expected.

Notes for the Chapter:

> guess who's BACK!!!! it's me i'm back!!! everything got really shitty at the end of summer and school got off to a rough start, but that was no excuse to abandon one of my favourite babies for so long)): i missed this story!! i hope you guys enjoy the update. it was meant to be a bit longer, but it sort of came to a natural end and i didn't want to take even longer figuring out how to reroute it when i was already satisfied with the product. all that being said: i hope you enjoy!!

Jane screams so loudly the birds go flying up in a stormcloud beyond the fence, her arms flailing wildly. "Dustin, help!" He goes to grab on to her outstretched hand and help her keep her balance, but he's not close enough, and she goes plummeting over the edge.

"Traitor!" she yells as she resurfaces, but she's grinning. Her eyes are bright in the afternoon sunlight, and Dustin can't help but grin back at her.

He hasn't been to Steve's house since Max's birthday, but walking in hadn't been as awkward as he expected. Partially because Mike was already swinging Jane around in his arms, the both of them laughing, and partially because Max had held his hand all the way out to the backyard. At first, they'd just sprawled out on the ground, talking over each other about ten different topics, but Lucas had dragged Max up to dance when his favorite song came on, and she had kissed

his cheek before promptly pushing him into the pool. Mike had instantly seized the opportunity to scoop Will up into his arms and do the same. (Dustin strongly suspects that it had a great deal to do with getting to scoop Will up in his arms.)

Steve turns the music up. "Jump, Henderson!" he yells, grinning. "Come on! Afraid to get wet?" Dustin flips him off with both hands and walks backwards, trying not to flinch as he topples blindly over the edge. "Three out of ten, slowpoke."

Dustin pulls a face and splashes water at him. "I don't see you jumping, Harrington," he shot back. "Ain't no bite?" Steve sticks his tongue in lieu of answer and hops up, stripping his shirt over his head. Dustin ducks to avoid the splash and comes up laughing. Steve is grinning, the water already making a mess of his hair, and he dives at him, the both of them yelling playfully.

On the other end of the pool, Max is sitting on the diving board, laughing at Lucas's bitching about her getting his clothes wet. Mike yells, "Only fair!" and Max immediately deigns to dive into the water to tackle him for it, skirt be damned. Will has clambered out to lay on the hot concrete, but he's got his head tilted to the side to watch them, grinning widely. Dustin pauses momentarily, his eyes searching for Jane. She'd been here just a moment ago, hadn't she?

He turned, eyes still searching, and was instantly greeted by more water as she tackled him, knocking them both back into the water. They came up with wide grins, his arms wrapped around her tightly. "There you are." She giggles, pressing her nose to his, and the sunlight falls over them oh-so-gently, and this is what summer is supposed to be. This is how it's supposed to feel, carefree and open and warm bodies pressed together in Steve's pool. This is what he's been craving.

Jane giggles again. Her eyes are sparkling. "Miss me?" she teases, and Dustin laughs for the millionth time today, spinning her around as well as he can in the water.

"Always," he replies, much more honestly than he meant to, but she just keeps grinning and runs her fingers down his spine. Hugging Jane is sort of like what he remembers from riding his dad's

motorcycle. It's exhilarating, takes the breath out of his lungs if he leans too much into it, but there are warm arms around him that he trusts more than anything in the world, and that's enough to make it feel like home. Jane's always made him feel a little more at home. "I love you," he says.

Her face lights up even more. His chest feels like it's radiating sunlight to see her eyes shine like that, and he brings a hand up to run through her hair gently. "I love you too." Her voice is always so honest. It makes him smile before he can help it. "You want to go get more drinks?"

"Yeah, sure," he accepts easily, following her out of the pool, and it's not until they're inside that he realises the cooler is still full. He doesn't mention it. Sometimes Jane just can't be around crowds anymore, he's noticed; at parties or movie nights or that one baseball game she'd made it to when her school had a week off she'll drag him away, onto the front porch or under the bleachers, and they'll be there, just the two of them, existing together. He likes it.

Jane wraps her arms around herself, shivering lightly in the air conditioning. Their footsteps are wet as they head to the kitchen. He's just following her lead. It's easy to follow Jane's lead. It always has been, really, from the moment she looked at him with those big brown eyes and admitted she'd been messing with the compasses. He'd been pissed, yeah, but not enough to override the awe that filled him head to toe. She was smarter than he'd ever be. She was more than he'd ever be in every way, and it made his skin buzz pleasantly to watch her, to follow as she made whatever path she needed to. She was everything she needed herself to be, everything anyone could ever want for her to be, all wrapped up in a girl small enough to pick up and swing around in his arms.

She pulls herself up onto the counter, appraising him. "You're thinking," she accuses, as if this is some heinous crime. Dustin hums and places his hands on either side of her thighs, leaning in to press his nose against her shoulder briefly.

"About you." He's close enough to feel her face soften. His heart softens with it. (God, he's feeling sappy today. It's hard not to be sappy with Jane, though. She worms her way into his life, into his

arms, so effortlessly, like there's nowhere else she'd rather be, and he's constantly thanking God for his best friend. (Okay, they're all his best friends, but what do technicalities matter?)) "Do you really want to get drinks?" She shrugs. Her smile remains unbudged. He brings a hand up to touch her cheek gently. "You've got freckles," he murmurs, somewhat in awe. Jane giggles again. It's gentler than before. It's just for the two of them, not for the whole sunny world. Dustin wouldn't mind a small sunny world with just Jane right here. He taps one that's just above her lip. "Max has one here, too," he remarks absentmindedly.

Jane's face falls slightly, he thinks, but it's so brief that he's half-convinced he imagined it. "We match, huh?" Her tone is a little more careful. He taps the freckle again.

"Yep." He can feel a sick kind of feeling in his gut, crawling towards his throat, but he keeps his face relaxed. "It's kinda cute when my girls match."

What.

What the fuck did he just say?

Jane scoffs and buries her head in his shoulder, but he can feel her grin. "Thanks," she says. He can feel the hot brush of her breath along his collarbone, and it's making his head soar like he's drunk. He hasn't had anything, has he?

He stands there for a moment to relish it all before pulling her forward into his arms and laughing at her yelp. "Easy, easy," he reassures. "I won't drop you." Jane bites his shoulder, and it *hurts*. "Okay, I might."

She kicks him a bit where her legs are locked around his waist. "You're an asshole, Henderson," she says sternly. "You know you're an asshole?" He just laughs at her again and spins around a few times to make her cling onto him tighter. Jane has this way of making him light, alive, like everything is honey and everything is okay. She covers him. "God, why do I love you?" She sounds exasperated, but it

melts into fondness when he adjusts her weight and presses their noses together again.

“Because I’m the best?” he guesses. She hums and nods.

His face feels sort of weird. He’s blushing, maybe.

He shifts her so that she’s bridal style in his arms, too caught in smiling down at her to notice the figure sneaking up behind him until a chin is on his shoulder. “I thought I might find you here,” Lucas says. His voice is amused. “You guys are insufferable, you know?” Dustin blinks at him, but Jane is glaring suddenly.

“Shut up,” she snaps, and then very primly adds, “Put me down." Dustin obliges in bewilderment. She adjusts her shirt and crosses her arms, still scowling. Lucas snorts. He smells like chlorine. His arms slide around Dustin in the same kind of hug Max likes to give him. He leans back into it gratefully, still unsure as to what the tension is.

He settles for tilting his head back against Lucas’s shoulder and reaching out one hand to Jane. He wiggles his fingers until she takes them. The air conditioner is way too cold without Jane pulled up against him, so he pulls her back and lets her head rest against his shoulder. Lucas squeezes him slightly with a laugh, the signature coarse sound that always makes Dustin grin. He'd *missed* Lucas. God. He'd missed him a lot.

"Oh!" Dustin turns his head at the exclamation to see the girl standing in the doorway, eyes wide. She's- fuck. The girl with the cute bangs. He literally heard her name, like, last night, what the fuck. "Sorry, should I…" she looks a little lost, staring at the three of them, and Dustin cannot summon the brainpower to do much else but stare back.

Jane speaks up after a moment. "It's okay." She steps back from the hug. She's smiling, but it's a little strained. "We were just… grabbing drinks."

Lucas laughs, but it's too high to be his normal laugh, and lets go of Dustin to pat his shoulder. "Yeah. Sorry, Allie." Allie. Right. That's her name.

Oh, he should probably say something, right? "Do you want to come swimming?" he asks on instinct. Jane's head swings toward so quickly he's surprised it doesn't make a noise, her eyes wide. She looks… upset? Do she and Allie somehow have beef from different states that Dustin doesn't know about?

Allie laughs a little awkwardly and shakes her head. She is pretty, he notes absentmindedly, and way out of James's league. She's also wearing Troy's Duran Duran shirt. "No, it's okay. Sorry for… intruding."

"You didn't intrude," Lucas says, almost snapping. His entire body is tense, hovering a few inches behind Dustin. Allie presses her lips together.

A hand lands on her shoulder, and then Troy steps into the room, surveying them. His face is more relaxed than usual. Open, half-amused, taking them in. He and Jane regard each other with slight distrust. Troy's never gotten over his more prickly habits around her, for some reason. "Morning," he greets, all easy charm and grace as he squeezes Allie's shoulder and steps past her. Dustin can't help the slight tension that leaves his shoulders as Troy gives him half a grin and pulls out the coffee pot. "Thought you guys were outside."

"Came in to get some drinks," Dustin replies, even though he's really not sure why they came inside at this point. Then, just to be a little shit, he adds, "I didn't expect to meet James's girlfriend like *this*. Been a pleasure."

Allie laughs a little, ducking her head. Her eyes catch his from beneath her bangs. She's smiling a bit. "Has it?" she asks, and he shrugs, smiling back. Troy has frozen slightly at the counter, looking some kind of guilty, but it's only for a moment. Dustin can't decide if he wants to analyze this situation much further.

Lucas slings an arm around Dustin's shoulders, clearly trying to act casual. "Isn't she kind of out of his league?" he whispered in Dustin's ear, not hushed at all, and Dustin snorts. Jane rolls her eyes at them. Allie shrugs a bit, but she looks amused.

Troy checks his watch and finishes his coffee, clicking his tongue.

"Well, we'd love to stay and chat, but we have places to be," he says, and Dustin snorts again.

"You're just going to James's house, aren't you?"

Troy flips him off and grabs Allie's hand as he leaves. "Hate you! See you tomorrow, sweetheart!"

Oh *shit,* the party. "Yeah, see you tomorrow, hon!" he calls back, and groans as soon as the door closes. "I forgot about the party." He receives two blank gazes in return. "Andy's having a party. End of summer shebang kind of thing. God, I wonder if Max wants to skip, I fucking hate Andy."

Lucas laughs, the sound muffled in Dustin's shoulder. It feels comfortable, having him pressed against his side like this. "Everyone fucking hates Andy," he replies.

"Even I fucking hate Andy," Jane adds. "And I have no clue who he is."

Dustin holds out an arm to her, reeling her back into his chest. He doesn't like to go long without holding Jane. It's a hollow sort of feeling when he does. "You should," he says, and then doesn't say anything else for a while, and the clock just sort of ticks in the background while they stand there wrapped around each other in the middle of Steve's kitchen.

Lucas hums into Dustin's shoulder and then pulls away. "I should get back out there. Max wanted me to check on you." Dustin nods, silently mourning the warmth, and pulls Jane into a more proper hug to hide in her hair.

She runs her fingers up and down his back again. "What do you think about them?" she asks after a minute, abruptly breaking the silence. Dustin blinks. "Lucas and Max," she elaborates. "Do you think… you know. Will they get back together?"

Dustin's throat feels like sandpaper. "Oh. I-" *I don't want them to,* he almost says, but bites it back. He's pretty sure the whole Max Thing is obvious already, thanks. "I'd kind of forgotten they dated, honestly,"

he says instead. It's hard to hold onto memories from back then. Something about the supernatural monsters and wave of death tended to make everything else fade. Jumble up. Dustin can't remember a lot of things at this point; there was the radio, the mall, the move, and somewhere in there was Max and Lucas and Mike and Jane and Will and Steve and Robin and Erica and Back to the Future and Russians and drugs and Hopper and grief and three long, empty months he's surprised he lived through. There's all that, and then there's the baseball tryouts and meeting Freddie and feeling good in the uniform and feeling sick in the uniform because he was awful, Mike said he was awful, Mike said he was abandoning his friends and there was The Fight. He can't remember how the argument started, can't remember what day or month it was, but he can remember standing in the school hallway at six in the morning with Mike wearing that stupid, awful red sweater, and he remembers saying things he's glad he can't quite recall and he remembers blood on his knuckles. He remembers the long lull of suspension. He remembers the terrible, empty feeling that came with losing the only friends he had ever really wanted.

Honestly, he tries not to remember much else.

Jane's hand comes up to touch his face, and his chest feels a little less like it's caving in on itself. He takes a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry," she says. "I know you- I'm sorry."

Dustin sighs out a soft, "don't worry about it," and brings a hand up to run through her hair. It's soft. It smells like cherries. He's starting to like cherries, he thinks. "I have you. That's more than enough."

She giggles, and the world feels like it's tilted back on its axis. "I love you too." He wrinkles his nose at her, but she just wrinkles hers back and looks so cute that he forgets what they were talking about. Like when Max makes that face she gets when she's bored, that little twist of her lips, the almost melancholy slope upward in her brow- it's the same feeling in his chest, the pleasant buzz. Like very soft bees. Eternal summertime.

"Ok, sunshine," he says softly after a minute. "I love you." And he does. And he's said it a million times, but it's so warm right now, radiating out of him. The kitchen turns into something unearthly, just

for a moment, somewhere completely and irrevocably safe. Dustin hasn't felt safe in such a long time. His chest aches sharply, suddenly, and he steps back. "We should get back outside," he mumbles, unsure why his voice feels so clumsy in his own mouth. "They're probably waiting on us."

They're not. But Mike pushes himself from where he's sprawled out on the ground next to Will and grins maniacally. "Hey, hey, hey!" he calls. "Look who's back!" Dustin pulls a face back and settles at the edge of the pool, kicking his legs back and forth in the water. Jane pauses next to him. She's looking to the other end of the pool- to Max and Lucas, who are half tangled together and lost in whatever conversation they're having. It feels like a kick to the chest.

He thinks about the freckles under Max's rib. At least he has that little moment to hold onto.

Jane ends up wriggling her way in between Mike and Will, blinking innocently in response to Mike's glare. Will just looks fondly amused by it. He's been giving Mike a lot of looks like that recently, all soft and open and full of silent laughter. Maybe he's picking up on it. Maybe he's always picked up on it and it just doesn't bother him anymore. Maybe- and it hates how bitter the thought is in his mouth- he's the last one left alone. Lucas with Max, and Mike with Will, and Jane with… well, with everyone, basically, because Jane refuses to be lonely. Dustin isn't good at not being lonely. He's just Dustin, the one that's not good enough, for the thousandth time.

It doesn't really matter anyway, because even if he's not the last one left standing, he's alone right now. He kicks his feet in the water and wishes sort of hazily that he could go under.

Notes for the Chapter:

> thank you for reading!! drop a comment, let me know what you thought, or hit me up on tumblr (@theworriedman). i'd love to hear your thoughts!!

6. think clearly before you nearly mess up the situation you're gonna miss dearly

Summary for the Chapter:

So, it’s ten minutes into the party, and Dustin is already sprawled out across the bathroom floor, staring up at the ceiling and wondering why he came. Great.

-

She’s so soft, so sweet; his sunshine. His pretty sunshine. She’s so good. She’s in love with him. And she’s drunk, and she’s too good for him, and he’s in love with Max, and Lucas is so fucking pretty, and Dustin- he’s so fucking disgusting. He makes himself *sick*.

-

or; dustin goes to a party, gets in a fight, remembers too much, makes a phone call, and has a realisation. (not in that order.)

Notes for the Chapter:

the mental illness is strong in this one please be careful

also this is literally twice as long as the other chapters but there's no good place to cut it to uh. that's just how it's gonna be, i guess? (opposite energy to my last a/n fjifhireh) please enjoy!

“I changed my mind,” Dustin says instantly. “Nope. No. I no longer want to be here.” He goes to turn the car back on, but Max smacks his hand away from the ignition.

“Oh no you *don’t,* Dusty,” she says sternly. “We-” she gestures between the two of them. “Are going to go in there and we are going to have a great time and we are going to avoid Andy at all costs. And, well.” She throws him a wink before she throws open the car door. “We’ll be the hottest ones there, so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

Dustin chuckles, slightly breathless. “You, maybe.” Max sticks her tongue out at him. It doesn’t make her any less breathtaking. “When’d you get that, anyway? I don’t remember it.” He locks the car behind him, falling into step next to her as they head up the street. Andy’s house is lit up brilliantly in the evening light.

“Oh, this?” Max glances down at her shirt. “It’s from Jane. She said she never wears it anymore, so.”

Dustin hums, glancing at it again. It’s very low cut. He very pointedly does not notice this. “It’s nice. White is good on you.” Max smiles at him, but before she says anything, they reach the door. Dustin cringes. “Ready?”

“Oh, never will be,” Max replies breezily, and pulls him inside without another word.

The house is packed. Apparently everybody was as bored as Dustin and Max tonight, because it’s filled wall to wall with people yelling and laughing and drinking like their lives depend on it. Someone cheers their names, because that’s a thing that happens at parties for some reason, and then Troy crashes into him. “Ah, shit, sorry,” he apologises. He’s flushed red from laughter and alcohol. “Was just tryna-” he squints at his own hand, hyperfocusing on its slow movement, until he grabs Dustin’s wrist. “There we go! Hi, Max! Okay, come on-” and then he drags Dustin away.

Dustin stumbles along behind him, trying not to bash too hard into too many shoulders, until Troy shoves him into the kitchen. “He’s here!” he yells. The group that’s sprawled out across the floor cheers loudly. Dustin laughs, grabbing the drink Troy shoves in his hand and joining them. They always hang out on the kitchen floor. It’s tradition, because they’re all idiots. If Dustin thinks about it, he could probably describe the kitchens of several dozen houses in Hawkins. Not a very useful skill, but you know. Bragging rights. He plops down next to Freddie and offers a fist bump. Freddie gives him a wink, too. Dustin pulls a face in reply.

Graham is laying on his back, humming the national anthem to himself, although the rhythm sounds… off. Graham is kind of tone deaf, too. As long as he’s having fun, though. He breaks off when he

registers Dustin's presence. "Dustin! My man!" He tries to salute. It looks nothing like a salute. "Where were you yesterday, my boy? My friend? *Mi amigo?* Hm?"

"Yesterday?" Dustin asks blankly.

Freddie snorts. "We binged a bunch of shitty movies in Lane's basement and Graham got so stoned he forgot who Tom Cruise was," he relays flatly. "Kept calling him "that cool motherfucker". I called you, you didn't answer."

"Oh, sounds fun. I was out all day."

"Yeah, out *trashing my house!"* Troy interrupts from above them. He's sitting on the counter, leaning over the edge. He's got a bottle swinging in one hand, shirt halfway unbuttoned, sunglasses on- typical Harrington shit. Dustin rolls his eyes.

"We broke *one* table," he retorts.

"Yeah, but you *broke a table!"*

Dustin shrugs. "Wasn't me. Sue Will." Troy groans, pouring a tiny bit of beer on his head. *"Hey!"* He scowls. "Bitch."

"Will Byers?" Sarah interrupts. She's halfway in Lane's lap, the two of them sharing a cup of something. Her lipstick is smeared. She still looks like a model, though, because aren't girls named Sarah always infuriatingly pretty? "I thought he left town."

"I didn't know he was *in* town," Lane says. "I would've said hi. I don't know him at all, but." She shrugs, gesturing for the cup. Sarah raises it to her lips for her.

Dustin rolls his eyes. "Just say you think he's hot, Lane."

"I mean." Freddie shrugs. "I'm not gay, but like-" Dustin hits his shoulder. "Ow! That was a compliment!" He huffs, whacking Dustin in return. "Made me lose my train of thought. I was going to say something funny."

"Were you going to say you'd let him help you break a table?" Sarah

asks. “Because I’ve already made that joke in my head three times, and I don’t even think he’s hot.”

“You stole that joke from me!” Freddie accuses, pointing at her. “You stole my joke! Fuckin’ thief.” He crosses his arms tightly with a scowl that’s almost a pout.

Sarah scrunches up her face. “You didn’t even make the joke,” she points out. “And anyway, isn’t he, like, gay?” She glances around before she says it, but nobody gives them any strange looks.

Dustin rolls his eyes. “People used to say that in *middle school,* come on. Grow up.” Sarah holds her hands up in mock surrender, her cup sloshing dangerously. Lane makes an annoyed noise and grabs her wrist, dragging it down for another drink.

Graham sighs wistfully from the floor. “If he were gay, I would know,” he says. They all stare at him. “What? I like blondes.”

Dustin makes a face. “Okay, this is getting weird. Let’s stop talking about my friend being hot, please.” Freddie, Graham, and Lane all make disappointed noises. Sarah and Dustin lock eyes, identical despairing looks on their faces.

“If Tom Cruise was blonde-”

“Okay, someone please volunteer for Graham duty,” Dustin interrupts, because he’s *not* interested in where that sentence was going. “Otherwise he’s gonna come out to the baseball team or some shit.” Graham mumbles something about baseball pants. “Graham, *no.”*

Freddie sniggers. “Yeah, okay. I got him.” He pulls Graham up off the floor, draping his arm over his shoulders. “Come on, G, let’s go. We’re just gonna go sober up a bit, okay?” Graham agrees reluctantly, stumbling along with Freddie out of the kitchen. Dustin shakes his head. Sarah and Lane are snickering. There’s a distant crash and a shout of, “Graham, no!” Dustin pinches his nose in disappointment. Yeah. Parties are fun.

“Okay, but how *did* Byers break a table?” Allie asks. She’s laying on

her stomach across the counter next to Troy, dangling over Dustin's head. "What were you guys even doing? Last thing I saw was Wheeler setting something on fire."

"What?" Dustin and Troy exclaim in unison. Dustin shakes his head. "Sorry, when was this?"

Allie hums, tilting her body back and forth slightly. Troy grabs the back of her shirt to steady her. "Like, right after I woke up? Five minutes before I saw you, I guess."

"You slept over?"

Allie barely spares Sarah a look. "Yeah. Anyway, Wheeler was doing weird shit in the backyard, I don't know. I assume someone was watching him." Dustin sighs. "Maybe he should have, like, a full time babysitter. Or a stalker with police training."

There's the echo of a laugh that has Dustin cringing. "The stalker with a stalker? Now *that's* funny."

Dustin's lips tighten. "He's not-" he cuts himself off, trying to keep calm. Andy ignores him, anyway. He just strolls around to get another drink. Dustin glowers at his back. The music is pumping loud in his ears. It's hard to keep calm when the whole house is crammed with chaos, but he breathes in and out slowly, focusing on other things. Focusing on yesterday. Focusing on sitting with Mike on his bed at two in the morning, talking about fights and boys. He knows Mike better than Andy does, he reminds himself. Andy's just talking shit.

Except then Andy turns around and says, "Still can't believe you'd let your girl around him. Aren't you afraid he'll-" and Dustin is on his feet before he can help it, fist halfway into the air.

"Woah!" Troy jumps off the counter, grabbing his wrist. "Woah, hey. Dustin. Calm down." He's glaring at Andy too, which is sort of surprising, considering he doesn't like Mike either. He probably just wants an excuse to glare at Andy. Don't they all, honestly. Andy just smirks, taking another sip. He's unflinching. Something about that burns in Dustin's stomach sharply. He should be flinching. He should

be fucking terrified. He should be fucking crying, saying something like that, and if Dustin were stronger, he'd beat him for him. He'd *make* him cry. But Dustin's not stronger. Dustin's never been threatening in his life. Dustin's always been weak.

Fuck.

He rips his hand out of Troy's grip and stalks away before he does something stupid.

His head is churning now, and he finds himself searching the crowd for a friendly face. He doesn't see anyone, except a flash of what he thinks might be Hanna in the corner, arguing with her brother. He'd laugh at any other time, but right now he just feels sick. He pushes through the crowd. He shoves his drink into some open hand as he passes. He doesn't want it anymore, not when his whole body is already rioting against itself. He stumbles up the stairs half-blindly, not really caring where he's heading, and slams open the first door he finds. It's a bathroom. And it's *empty,* thank God.

So, it's ten minutes into the party, and Dustin is already sprawled out across the bathroom floor, staring up at the ceiling and wondering why he came. Great.

It's fucking dumb, really. Mike probably wouldn't have given a shit. He *should,* but he probably wouldn't. He'd just roll his eyes and take a shot or whatever, and then he'd go sulk in a corner with his feet up and make fun of people's dancing. That was why Andy always played his stupid little games with Dustin instead. Mike never went along with it. Dustin can taste bile in his throat, and he squeezes his eyes shut tightly. He's such a fucking *wimp.* Can't take an insult, can't keep his cool, can't even start the fucking fight. All he can do is get angry and get hurt and hide. All he ever does is get upset. Every time, he ends up back here, laying on the cold floor and hating, hating, *hating* himself. He's so fucking pathetic. He makes himself sick.

Mike would be disappointed in him. He's not sure why the thought hurts so much, but he cringes painfully as it hits him. Fuck.

(he has half a thought to fill the bathtub and stick his head under, but his body doesn't move when he tries, so he just stays there,

staring at the ceiling. it's bright white.)

(he wonders if aidan stared at the hospital ceiling like this. he'd been awake for a minute, at the end. dustin hadn't gone inside.)

(he's always been too weak to face his demons.)

His head lolls to the side, cheek pressing into the floor. "Fucking hate Andy," he muttered, scowling. Fucking Andy. Always ruining everything. It had been a perfectly good party, Graham's weird drunk ramblings aside, and then fucking Andy came along and- well, okay, it's more Dustin's fault for getting mad, but people don't get to talk about Mike like that. He can't just sit there and let it happen. He's done that for too long. God, if he'd just sat there listened, he'd still be sick with himself. He should've just punched Andy right in his stupid, ugly face and been done with it. He would definitely lose. He glanced down at his shirt. It was a stupid bright yellow one that Will had given him as a joke gift years ago. There was a big orange duck on it. At least he'd have gone down in style.

His cheek fell onto the floor again. He still lost, didn't he? Andy would get a kick out of this.

There's a knock at the door. He huffs, closing his eyes. Maybe if he pretends to be passed out, whoever it is will just leave. It creaks open slowly.

"Dustin?"

Fuck. He keeps his eyes closed, not wanting to face Lucas right now.

"Wait, what?" Max's voice echoes from a little further away. She's probably standing behind him. "Dustin?" Okay, now he kind of wishes he were *actually* passed out. There's a moment where the volume of the room floods, and he groans slightly at the pulsing in his head, but the door clicks closed. "Oh, Dusty, you okay?" He scrunches up his face.

A hand brushes his hair off his forehead gently. "He's alive, right?" Lucas's knee nudges against his shoulder. He's sitting next to him. Dustin sort of wants to roll over into his lap and let Lucas hold him

until all the ugly feelings go away, but he doesn't. He can't. He just breathes in and out and tries not to start crying.

"I think so," Max murmurs. Her footsteps stagger slightly, and then she's on his other side. She taps his cheek. "Hey, Henderson. You good?" She's drunk. He can hear it in her voice. Lucas's knee presses into his shoulder again.

Dustin swallows hard. "Fuck off." It comes out as a mumble, hoarse through his dry throat. Lucas's sigh is relieved, though, so he rolls his head up, opening his eyes. Their faces are knit up in concern. He almost starts laughing, but laughing is a lot of work, so he just closes his eyes again instead. "I'm napping."

Lucas's fingers trace along his hairline again. "On the bathroom floor?"

"Mhm."

"You wanna nap somewhere else, maybe?" Dustin shakes his head. "Dustin-" There's a soft shushing noise. Dustin cracks open his eyes in time to see Max press a finger to Lucas's lips with a frown. He goes cross eyed looking down at it. Dustin smiles hazily. His head falls over to the other side this time, onto Lucas's knee. Lucas startles, looking down at him. A little half-smile spreads over his face, and those fingers are back, ghosting over his cheek. "Hey," he whispers.

Dustin leans into the touch. "Hey." His voice is weaker than he'd expected. Max shifts so her legs are bent up under her, pressing into his side. Her head comes over to rest against Lucas's shoulder. Her face is soft. "Max…"

She reaches out one hand. It presses into his chest, just over his heart, warm and strong and gentle, like she knows it's hers. Maybe she does. "Missed you," she mumbles. Dustin smiles distantly. "Asked Lane where you were. She sch-schaid, uh- schaid you left." Her nose crinkles up in a pout.

"You're cute."

Max lights up. "Me?" Dustin nods slowly. Max's hand on his chest

takes hold of his shirt posessively. “You’re cute too.” Dustin rolls his eyes. Max huffs. “You’re *cute,”* she insists. “Cute, cute, cute. Lucas. Lucas, tell him he’s cute.”

Lucas presses a kiss to her temple. His eyes are trained intensely onto Dustin’s. “Yes, Max, he’s very cute,” he agrees. Dustin’s surprised smile makes Lucas’s gaze soften. It’s sweet. This is good, right now. Max hums her satisfaction, scooting closer to the both of them, but considering there’s already no space, it doesn’t really work. She grumbles, tugging on Dustin’s shirt. Lucas shushes her. “Hey, no, we came here to get you cleaned up, remember?” he says quietly. “Dustin doesn’t wanna get up, baby.” It’s true, Dustin doesn’t wanna get up. Dustin does, however, have the sudden desire to pull Max on top of him and kiss her, which isn’t, you know, *new,* but definitely poorly timed. Lucas’s fingers are still on his face.

Max groans. “But I wanna k-”

“Max.”

There’s something peculiar about Lucas’s eyes in this light. For a moment, they look so sad. But then the softness is back, and he’s smiling down at Dustin, and Max is mumbling, “Sorry, Dustin,” even though she hadn’t done anything. He tells her that. Mumbles it, more like. Max just sighs. “Sorry for that, too,” she says, nonsensically. Lucas kisses her head again.

“There’s tequila in your hair,” he whispers. Max frowns. Dustin squints, suddenly registering how much of a mess Max *is.*

“Ah, *Maxine,”* he says, and sits up, reaching out for her. Her face fits so perfectly in his hands, he thinks kind of hazily. Lucas’s arm loops around his waist as support. That’s good. He feels very shaky. “What’d you do?” Her makeup is all smudged. She isn’t wearing a lot, never wears a lot, but there’s streaks of mascara and eyeshadow, and there’s tracks running through her foundation. Dustin frowns. “Were you crying? Did someone do something? Do I need to fight them?” (He thinks maybe he could win a fight for Max. Not for Mike, though, and that makes him feel a bit sick.)

(It’s not that Max is more important. It’s just that Max would never

let him fail.)

“I love you,” he murmurs, before he really means to. Lucas’s shoulder shakes with silent laughter where it’s pressed into his back.

Max smiles brightly. “I love you too!” She leans further into his hands. “I’m okay. Some- someone was-” her whole body shudders. “Someone’s hair. All curly. They looked like-” she waves a hand in the air. Dustin can feel his face crumble. “I got scared. I’m okay.”

“She ran into someone,” Lucas relays. “Got his drink spilled on her. We were going to clean her up a little bit.”

Which wasn’t a great thing for Lucas to say, because Dustin, whose senses had been somewhat hazed this whole time, very suddenly registered that Max’s hair was wild and wet, and Max’s shirt was soaked, and Max was wearing a white shirt, and Dustin says, “Oh,” but it tends a little too sharply towards breathless. Neither of them notice, though, he’s pretty sure. He pulls his hands away from Max’s face. “Okay. Should I go?”

Max grabs his hands in midair. “No. Don’t go.” Her eyes have gone suddenly wide. His heart capsizes dangerously inside his chest. “Don’t go,” she repeats, and then squeezes his hands once and stumbles up to her feet. Dustin watches, confused, as she uses a hand on the wall for balance, finding her way into the tub. Once she’s flopped against the ceramic, she peers at the handles, and then awkwardly twists at one. (She’s pulling it the wrong way.) Max whines in distress, looking over at them with those big blue eyes again. Dustin’s head has rolled back into Lucas’s neck. He can feel his friend’s pulse seize against his cheek. “Help?”

Dustin pulls himself somewhat reluctantly off Lucas and crawls over to the side of the tub, brushing some wayward hair out of her face. “What do you need?” She points to the handles. He turns them on carefully, trying not to make it too hot or cold. Max wiggles her toes in the water stream, giggling. Dustin can’t help but smile at the sound. Drunk Max is cuter than he remembered. Maybe this is why he keeps coming to parties. “You’re pretty,” he tells her. She rolls her eyes.

“I look like-” she screws up her face. “Rocky Horror. ‘M all messy.”

Dustin indulges himself just slightly, because the twist in his heart is worth the smile on Max’s face, and cups her cheek in hand, rubbing it with his thumb. “You’re still pretty.”

He hears the click of the lock and twists around. Lucas is watching them from the door, his face all soft again, a smile curling up at the side of his mouth. He’s always liked Lucas’s smile. It’s warm. Or he’s warm. Or everything’s warm, because the music is muted and he’s with two of his favorite people. “You’re pretty, too,” he adds, because he doesn’t want him to feel left out.

Lucas’s eyes falter for a moment, looking sad, but then he’s crossing the room and settling down next to Dustin, long legs drawn up to his chest. “Well, I guess we’re all pretty, then,” he says. Dustin pulls a face. “Stop that.” He pokes his chest. “You’re pretty.” Dustin pulls a face again, just to be annoying.

Max holds out her arms to Lucas. “Luke. Lukey. Help.”

Lucas twists to her immediately. “Help?” She wiggles her arms. “Oh. Max-” he glances at Dustin. She scoffs.

“Oh, it’s nothing he hasn’t seen before, come on.”

Dustin blinks. “Huh?”

Lucas closes his eyes, laughing silently for a moment, and pats Dustin’s shoulder. “Okay, baby. Arms up, okay?” Max obeys, staring him down like it’s a dare, and Lucas helps her peel her soaked shirt off over her head, dropping it on the ground. And. Okay, it’s true, Dustin has seen her shirtless before, because Max has no shame and changes in front of him all the time. It would be kind of funny if he wasn’t kind of hopeless for her. (Not kind of. He’s head over heels. Everyone knows it, probably.) He tries not to be weird about it, but it’s hard, because Max- and this is the part that always distracts him, somehow- has very nice shoulders. The rest of her is also very nice, but he doesn’t think about that, because he’s not going to let himself be a creep. Her shoulders, though, are slim and strong and slightly defined, sprinkled with freckles, and her skin is pretty and golden

and soft, and he wants to trace every scar until she feels them fade into her beauty. The scars aren't beautiful- they're from Neil, from Billy, from the tunnels, from the mall, and they're reminders, and they're evil. But it's Max's shoulders. They're not beautiful, but they don't have to be anything except scars. He wants her to feel like they're nothing except scars.

He shuts off the water, lingering at the task so that he won't stare. Max huffs and pokes him in the cheek with her foot. "Hey!" He turns around with a glare, settling next to Lucas again. "Rude."

Max shrugs, looking unrepentant. "Lucas isn't talking to me," she complains. "Talk to me."

Lucas and Dustin glance at each other blankly. "Uh," he tries. "School's starting soon." Lucas winces. Max lets out a groan, her head falling back to rest on the wall. "You said to talk!" Dustin defends. Max glares at him.

"Not like that!" She huffs. "I don't wanna go to school. God."

"I don't wanna be a senior," Lucas mutters. His head falls onto Dustin's shoulder. "Wanna go back to, like… sophomore year. Let's be sophomores again." Dustin shakes his head. "Aw, come on."

"I didn't like being a sophomore," Dustin says, and Lucas winces.

Max winces too, but she smoothes it over easily and says, "Well, let's just be sophomores differently, then. Do it right this time. We can, uh- let's see." She frowns in thought. "Remember Gabi's birthday?"

Dustin snickers. "Oh, you mean the *first* time you got drunk and took your shirt off at a party?" Max looks offended. Lucas, on the other hand, looks delighted. "It was funny," he informs him, immediately hearing Max's groan. "She was wearing a sweater, and she was complaining about it being hot-"

"How was *I* supposed to know vodka shots overheat you, I was fifteen-" Max defends hotly, but Dustin talks louder over her, laughing through his words.

"And she was sitting in my lap because I was trying to keep her from

punching Sarah-"

"Sarah was being a *bitch-"*

"Sarah was being *Sarah,* shut up, and then, then she pulled off her sweater and just- shoved it in my mouth, trying to make me shut up-" Dustin snatches up the abandoned shirt on the floor, shoving it in Lucas's face. Lucas was knocked backwards, but he grabbed onto the side of the tub, shaking with laughter as he knocked Dustin's hand away. "-Just like that! And it didn't work."

Max splashes water at him. "It *never* works with you," she snaps. "You never shut up. Always just going, "Max, don't do that," or "Max, put your shirt back on," or "Max, I'm not speeding," even though you're *always fucking speeding-"* Dustin throws the shirt at her this time, getting a shriek of laughter and more water in his face. "You are! You're always going, like, fifty! He's terrifying to drive with, Luke, literally terrifying-" Lucas cuts her off with a kiss that both of them are laughing into. Dustin leans onto the side of the tub, his chin resting on his hand, a smile tracing his lips.

He remembers the other day. Lucas's shirt. He should be jealous, he thinks distantly, like he was jealous then, but everything is so warm right now. He can't be jealous right now.

And besides, Lucas might be kissing Max, but Dustin is the one who knows she borrowed that bra from Jane, so. Ha. And Max might be kissing Lucas, but Dustin has Lucas's hand on his knee, and the warmth of it is making his whole body float.

Lucas is pretty, he thinks, and then-

And then something clicks, and Dustin's whole body seizes up sharply. Lucas pulls away from Max, his head snapping towards Dustin with immediate concern. "Dustin?" He glances at Max. "Sorry, was that-"

"No, it's fine," Dustin interrupts, staggering up to his feet. He smiles. It's strained, he can tell, but it's there. "Seriously. It's fine. I just… have to get home. My- mom. My mom needs me." Max reaches up from the water with a frown. He doesn't take her hands this time. He

feels sick. “I have to get home,” he repeats. “I’ll see you at school.” Lucas has risen to his feet, but Dustin shakes his head sharply and scrambles out of the room, slamming the door behind him. His head is spinning. Fuck.

“Dustin? Dustin!” Troy reaches for him, but he shoves him aside. “What’s- hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Dustin snaps. He’s shaky on his feet. “I have to-”

“Henderson!” Andy crows, and Dustin’s stomach roils. “There you are! Was wondering! Haven’t seen Mayfield tonight, was she in there sucking your-” Dustin spins around before he even thinks and slams his fist right into Andy’s nose. There’s a brief, sudden silence. Andy stumbles, but he comes back immediately with a cocky, “So, was she that bad?” And Dustin-

Dustin doesn’t even think. Dustin just snatches the bottle out of Troy’s hand and swings it as hard as he fucking can.

Andy goes careening down into someone’s side, and Dustin stands there, shoulders heaving, with the neck in his hand. His hand is smarting from the punch. It’ll hurt more later, but right now, he’s buzzing, numb with self-hatred, numb with adrenaline. “Stay the fuck away from me,” he spits. Flings the rest of the bottle on the floor. Storms out the door. Pretends he doesn’t see Lucas at the bottom of the stairs.

Nobody comes after him.

He doesn’t want them to. The loneliness still stings.

He shouldn’t have come.

There’s another car in the driveway when he pulls in, and he groans out loud, his head falling onto the steering wheel. Fuck. The boy’s over. Peter. Fucking *Peter*. They’re probably cooking together. They like to do that. Mom makes big fancy dinners with, like, duck and red wine and pasta or whatever the hell, and Peter makes these delicate little desserts like the kind in magazines. Nana always had them stacked up on her coffee table.

The memory strikes lightning down his throat, sends a landslide of burning guilt down through his chest, dragging his ribcage into his stomach. Nana never liked the noise, he remembers. There was a story. He doesn't know what the story was. He was too young to care back then. He just knew that she didn't like the noise, so he would always sit on the couch and sit Aidan on his lap and flip something open for them to read. Aidan always liked the magazines. He would point out the ones he liked with little chubby fingers and whisper the name. The names were always, like, French, though, and he tripped up on them every time, and Dustin always corrected him, but he was even worse at it, so they'd just sit there and laugh as quietly as two tiny boys could.

Dustin hasn't seen his Nana in years. He isn't sure whose fault that is- did she stop asking to see them, after everything, or did his mom just not want to see her? Could she see Dad in his mother's face? Would Dustin even recognise the similarities? He can't summon up her face in his mind. He wonders if she still remembers him, swinging his little legs on her couch and mispronouncing French desserts in a magazine.

Peter is probably in there making French desserts right now. They always drag him into it, get him to mix something or taste test, and then bicker about who's better, even though they're making totally different things, and they'll all eat their fancy dinner on the floor in front of the TV, playing Risky Business or something, and Dustin and Peter will cheer whenever Rebecca De Morney is on screen. Dustin likes Peter. Dad would like Peter, he thinks.

He glares at the car. Fucking *Peter*. "Weren't out of town very long, huh?" he mutters bitterly, and goes into reverse, skidding out into the road. Fuck French desserts.

(he always felt so strong, holding aidan in his lap. like nothing could hurt him, as long as dustin was there.)

(maybe that's true. dustin wasn't there. dustin didn't go inside, at the end.)

(did he cry? aidan always cried. he would always come running into dustin's arms with his little face all wet, begging his big brother to

make everything better.)

(would it have been better?)

(he'd always felt so strong with those magazines in his arms, but tonight he'd felt so weak with a shattered bottle.)

He keeps driving, driving, driving, going fifty, going sixty, flying past endless, empty fields, taking a sharp left away from Oldbrook and speeding up. The roads are empty except for him. The moon is full above him. Going seventy, going eighty. If he yanked the wheel right now, no one would notice for days.

Wouldn't it be poetic? Go down in a blaze of lonely glory, an adrenaline-drunk performer with no more parts to play. Go down like his dad. Go down like Aidan. Maybe he can protect them better from his grave.

He doesn't do it. Instead, he skids into a motel parking lot at four in the morning and sits in the shower for thirty minutes, staring at the wall. Like Max, sitting the bathtub, kissing Lucas, both of them laughing into it-

Dustin shuts off the water. There's a phone outside. His hands are shaking as he shoves the coins in.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry. I know it's late," is the first thing he says, and then, "I miss you. I miss you so much."

Jane pauses for a long moment. "Are you okay? You sound like you've been crying." Her words are slurring slightly, but they're bright with concern. Dustin laughs softly.

"And you sound drunk. God. I miss you, sunshine."

"I miss you too," she says, so softly, so tenderly, like silk and satin and spun wool. "I miss you so much."

"I'm in love with Max," he says. He hears his voice catch on a sob. "I love her. I can't- I can't stop. I love her so much." He can't say the

other part, the part that's choking out his brain, not right now. But he's never even said this much out loud before. He feels like a liar. He feels disgusting.

Jane's breath is shaky down the line. "I know." There's another pause, just her trembling breathing and his quiet sobs, meeting in the middle of the miles between them. He closes his eyes. "I'm sorry." Her voice is hoarse. She's crying too, he realises, and has to bite back a guilty noise. "I'm- I'm sorry. I love you, Dusty, I love you, I'm sorry."

"I'm in love with Max," he repeats.

"I'm in love with you," she says. Dustin squeezes his eyes shut. Jane is still crying. He wants to- fuck, but he wants to hold her so badly. He wants her to curl up in his arms and know that everything is okay. He wants everything to be okay. He wants to make fancy pasta and French desserts with her.

But. "You're drunk," he says softly. Jane starts something, her voice offended, but he says it again. "You're drunk. I- fuck. Janey." His heart is twisting painfully. "Tell me again," he whispers, selfish and sad and stranded miles away from her. He wishes miles were feet, were inches, wishes he could pull her into his arms. She fits so perfectly there. He doesn't know if he wants to kiss her.

He's disgusting. "I'm in love with you," Jane says again, and again. "I love you. I'm in love with you."

She's so soft, so sweet; his sunshine. His pretty sunshine. She's so good. She's in love with him. And she's drunk, and she's too good for him, and he's in love with Max, and Lucas is so fucking pretty, and Dustin- he's so fucking disgusting. He makes himself *sick*.

"God."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I-" the words stick in his throat. "Call- call me later, sunshine, okay? Call me tomorrow. Tell me again. But-" he breathes out slowly. "But you're drunk. I can't- I can't do this." He can't take

advantage of her like that. He's already disgusting enough.

Jane sniffs. "Promise?"

"Huh?"

"Promise you won't hate me?" God, she sounds so scared. As if he could ever-

He doesn't even hesitate. "I *promise,* Janey. I'll never, ever hate you. No matter what. Sober up, okay? Or- or whatever. Just take care of yourself." He can't protect her from so many miles away. He wants to, though, wants to so badly that his chest aches with it. "I-" he doesn't want to say it, not after this conversation. "You're my favorite," he says instead. "Take care of yourself."

Jane sniffs again. There's a smile in her voice. "Okay. You too, Dusty." There's a pause, and then she says, "She loves you too, you know," and hangs up so quickly that Dustin doesn't even process her words until the dial tone is ringing in his ear. He puts the phone back slowly. His hair is still dripping from the shower. He collapses onto the cheap pillows face first and pretends that's why they get soaked through.

Notes for the Chapter:

> wick, the only person that writes for this ship: makes it as unbearable as possible
>
> well that sure was fun. drop a comment, let me know what you thought! or sue me that's fair too

7. interlude

Summary for the Chapter:

> So here's the thing: she loves them both.
>
> And here's the thing: only one of them loves her back.
>
> -
>
> or; Max ponders.

Notes for the Chapter:

> look it's a little short chapter!!

Max wakes up with a pair of warm arms around her and snuggles into them immediately, murmuring something she can't even make out herself. Something spectacularly dumb, probably. There's a soft laugh above her. "You good, baby?" Max blinks, adjusting to the waking world.

"Lucas?" she mumbles. God, her head hurts. "Feel bad."

His hand cards through her hair. She can't help but melt into it, practically purring. His touch is always so gentle. Feels so good. "I believe that." There's a pause. "You cried a lot last night. You're probably dehydrated."

Max blinks again, squinting up at him. "I cried? Why'd I-"

Oh.

"Why do I always *cry* about it?" she groans, rolling her head into his shoulder again. Lucas's hand slips back into her hair.

"I cried too," he admits. There's a minute of silence, and then- "He split Andy's forehead with a bottle."

Max bolts up into a sitting position immediately. "He *what?"*

"Max-"

“No, fucking what? And you let him *leave?* After-” she cuts herself off, but they both know what she was going to say. They both remember her birthday. She doesn’t want to see that empty look in Dustin’s eyes ever again. She doesn’t want to see him cry like that, doesn’t want to hear him talk about himself like that- she doesn’t want to lose him. Not ever. And God, not to himself.

Lucas rubs her arms. His eyebrows are knit together tight, tight enough to clench at her heart. He’s worried too, she reminds herself. He loves Dustin just as much as she does, even if the road’s been rockier. She kisses him softly in apology. “I called his house. His mom said she hasn’t seen him.”

Max’s throat swells thickly. “Well, fuck.” Lucas keeps rubbing her arms. She wants to kiss him so fucking bad.

Then she remembers she can. Sometimes she mixes it up, which one of them she’s allowed to want. She hates that. It feels too… interchangeable. Her boys will never be interchangeable to her.

“You were right.”

“Hm?”

Lucas’s eyes are dark. They have that rich, deep sadness in them that twists her chest in a borderline painful way. “You were right,” he repeats. “It hurts worse when he’s honest.”

Oh.

Max can’t remember exactly what happened last night. Something about Dustin calling her pretty, touching her face, storming away- just little bits and pieces. Lucas’s eyes when he laughed. Dustin’s smile when he was brushing her hair out of her face. The two of them leaning on each other, looking up at her with open, honest adoration.

“He called me pretty,” Lucas relays. She hates the sadness in his voice. “Said he loves me.” There’s a moment of silence between them before he sighs. “I kind of hate that he does.”

“Me too,” Max says softly. It’s harder. It makes her feel so goddamn selfish. She’s his best friend, he loves her, he treasures her, and it’s

not enough, because she has this stupid gaping hole right in the middle of her chest and she wants him to fill it so fucking bad. Lucas fills as much as he can, but it'll never be enough. She's too empty, too lonely, and she'll never love either of them the way she should. She loves them both too much, so it's all not enough, and it's all nothing at all. It would be so much easier, sometimes, if Dustin hated her.

She probably deserves it. All that time she spent hating Mike and Lucas for abandoning them, and then she went and did it too. Let herself get dragged away from someone who'd needed her.

She'd needed him too. She's been so much happier recently.

Until her birthday. Fuck, she can't get those eyes out of her mind.

"I love him," she says.

"I know."

She looks over her shoulder. Feels her chest twist when she meets his eyes. "I love you."

Lucas smiles. "I know that, too." His kisses are always so sweet. "I love you, Max." He traces a finger down her face. "You'll say no if I ask you to homecoming, right?"

Max hesitates.

Lucas kisses her nose. "It's okay, baby," he assures her. Max still just frowns. "Hey. I mean it. It's okay."

And here's the thing. She doesn't like Dustin *more* than Lucas. But she likes Dustin *just as much.* And if that's who she is, so be it, then! Max will never be ashamed of wanting love. She will never be ashamed of loving. She has spent far too long being alone, being afraid, being hurt and lost and broken. She has spent too long being angry. Too many days have been wasted waiting to die. She'll never be ashamed of wanting to be happy, because she has spent too long believing she doesn't deserve it. If she's selfish, so be it, then.

But God, why does it have to be *him?*

So here's the thing: she loves them both.

And here's the thing: only one of them loves her back.

And here's the damn *thing:* Max is irrevocably, unashamedly selfish, because she deserves to be, and Max already has half of everything. But God- half will never be enough for her.

Notes for the Chapter:

> i just love max a lot that's all (: ok bye i hope all of you have a great day

8. there is a deeper world than this

Summary for the Chapter:

> His hands are trembling slightly as he punches in a number on the payphone. It rings in his ear, almost mocking. Tinny. Raspy. On and on and-
>
> “Hello?”
>
> He slams the receiver down.
> -
> or; Dustin wakes up as the same old person.

Notes for the Chapter:

> warning!!! there is a homophobic slur used in this chapter!!! it is used in a fairly lighthearted scene, not in a bullying scene, but it is still addressed as a slur and they do discuss it!!! so. be careful if the word f*g will discomfort you
>
> that being said. i don't even know if anyone will read this because it's been forty five years. im so fucking sorry

Dustin wakes up with a dry tongue and a pounding behind his temples. Sticky sunlight is pouring through the windows, soaking him like honey, leaving him lethargic in the sheets. He blinks a few times. His skin is crawling with dried sweat, his shirt stuck to his stomach. There’s a crick in his neck from sleeping in an odd position. It must have been the pillow. These damn motel pillows are shit.

Shit.

The motel.

He groans, rolling over and tugging the sheets over his head. Maybe if he dozes back off, he can ignore all of his problems. His mind is fuzzy. He remembers crying? Lucas’s eyes. Max’s laugh. His tears, but Jane’s sobs. Water. That white bra with the purple lace that Jane

likes so much, but Max's hair falling over it. Yelling and glass and blood on his hands.

His stomach turns. He pushes himself out of bed.

It's Monday, isn't it? Dustin stumbles to the bathroom, trying to blink himself to a functioning state. It takes a few tries to turn on the water, but eventually he manages, splashing his face. He stares at himself in the mirror. Pale skin, shadowed eyes, a weight to the edges of his lips- he looks pallid. Disgusting. He splashes more water on his face.

He doesn't have a change of clothes, so he strips off his and fills the bathtub, dropping them in. He uses the cheap soap at the sink to scrub himself. He can't meet his reflection's eyes.

When his clothes are wrung out and dripping dry over the shower bar, he lays on the bed, flipping absentmindedly through the Bible. Dustin has never been much for religion. His dad was Jewish, anyway. His mum grew up Catholic, he thinks, but she never talks about it. She doesn't talk about growing up very much. He only knows the scraps she drops when the margaritas get too strong.

"What, then, shall we say in response to these things?" he reads aloud. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" He scoffs, flipping the page. "The Romans, historically," he answers. "And theologically, the Devil, as far as I'm aware."

He flips back to Genesis and makes it through half of Numbers before his clothes are dry. His eyes hurt from the tiny script. No offence to God, but he's not feeling inclined to ever open a Bible again.

His hands are trembling slightly as he punches in a number on the payphone. It rings in his ear, almost mocking. Tinny. Raspy. On and on and-

"Hello?"

He slams the receiver down.

Shit.

It's nearly three by the time he gets home. He stops at the end of his street, considering, and rolls down his window. Peter's car is still in the driveway. He sighs, rolls his window up, and rolls right on past.

"Dustin. Holy shit, man." Troy pulls him inside immediately. "Holy shit." He pushes Dustin down onto the couch. "You look like shit. I hate you. Stay." And then he's flitting back to the kitchen. James waves from the other end of the couch.

Dustin waves back. "He seems hyper today."

"Anxious," James replies. Dustin glances down at his lap.

Soft footsteps come wandering in and stop short. "Dustin, oh my God." His head is barely up before Allie is beside him, frowning. "Are you alright?" She picks at his shirt. Her eyes narrow. "You smell like that stupid motel soap."

Dustin blinks. "You recognise the scent of motel soap?"

"It's what my dad always smells like." Dustin winces and opens his mouth to apologise, but she waves him off. "It's fucking, like, lavender and pine? Something weird like that. Very recognisable."

"Why were you at a motel, Henderson?" James interrupts.

Dustin twists his hands in his lap. He doesn't answer.

Troy comes back in and pushes at James's shoulder. "Move over," he mutters.

James doesn't even look up at him. "No."

"Move."

"No."

"You're such an asshole. Allie-"

"I'm not moving," she says, smiling sweetly at him. "There's already

room.” Troy glowers in response, though it morphs to a yelp as James yanks him down in between them. Dustin snickers quietly. He earns the glare this time. “You’re such an idiot,” Allie says, her voice fond.

“Why can’t you just sit on James’s lap or something? There’s not room for four people on this- why are you two looking at each other like that?” Troy glances between Allie and James suspiciously. They keep grinning at each other. “What are you plot- *James!”*

James sets his chin on his friend’s shoulder. “What?” he asks. He blinks innocently. The arms he’d used to pull Troy into his lap are around his friend’s waist, holding him there. Troy’s mouth has dropped half open with something like disbelief. He’s bright pink.

Allie laughs and shifts over, though she does tangle her hand with Dustin’s. She’s trying not to make him feel like a fourth wheel, he’s pretty sure. He squeezes her hand to show that he appreciates it and earns a smile in return. Her head is leant onto James’s shoulder. Her other hand slips into Troy’s.

James kisses the top of her head. “So, Henderson,” he says. “You gonna talk now?”

Dustin hums. “Don’t think so, no,” he replies. “Not much to tell, though. I just-” He’s interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. Footsteps coming rushing down the hall. He recognises them somehow and manages to shoot a betrayed look over to Troy before his arms are full. Max rockets straight onto him, her arms winding around her neck as her forehead presses against his temple. Her knees are bony pressed against his hips, but he won’t complain. He can feel her rapid heartbeat on his chest, her breath on his ear, her skin on his skin- how could he complain of anything right now? “Hey.”

“Hey?” she repeats. “God, you fucking *idiot--”*

“So I’ve been told.”

She groans, swatting at his shoulder. “You’re the worst. We were so *worried.* Mike skipped today to look for you.” Dustin opens his mouth to point out that it’s Monday, so what’s to say Mike wouldn’t have

skipped anyway, honestly, but Max is already ranting some more, so he closes it again. “Jane called my house--my *house!* She held a conversation with my *mom!*-- to ask if you were okay, and I had to tell her I didn’t know! You made me upset Jane!”

Fuzzily, Dustin can remember something. A phone call, both of them crying, and something… there’s something just out of reach, something he can’t quite grasp. A knot of unease settles in the pit of his stomach. “Max--”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m mad! I’m mad at you!”

“Yes, that’s quite clear--”

She huffs and leans back enough to put her hand over his mouth. “Hi, Troy,” she says conversationally. “Lap gang, amirite?”

“Ey, gang,” he replies. He looks much more comfortable in his seat now.

“It’s a short people thing, I guess,” Allie says offhandedly, and both Max and Troy instantly flare up, launching straight into defending themselves. James and Dustin exchange dry looks behind Allie’s head and settle in for the chaos.

His head still aches a little, and the yelling really doesn’t help. Max is flushed bright pink, her hands smacking at Allie’s shoulder and Troy’s head (he’s pretty sure that’s just for fun, not because Troy did anything). Dustin keeps his arms around her to hold her steady, because she’ll end up on the floor otherwise, flailing like that. Despite the pounding in his temples, a smile sneaks up onto his face. God, she’s cute.

“Max, did you--”

Dustin’s head snaps up at the voice. Lucas has frozen in his tracks at the door. Carefully, Dustin offers a weak wave.

James hauls Troy farther into his lap, correctly assuming that Max would clamber halfway onto Allie to keep harassing him, and nods in Lucas’s direction. Lucas gives him a tight smile and grabs Dustin by the wrist, yanking him into the hall.

“Woah, woah, careful--”

He’s cut off by Lucas’s shoulder. It’s awkward for a moment, because the hug is kind of tight and violent, but he adjusts, wrapping his arms around Lucas in return. A face presses into his hair. Hot breath shudders across his ear. “Fuck you, man.” Lucas’s voice is low, and rough, and oh, oh, Dustin isn’t sure what exactly he’s feeling, but it’s a lot. There’s this pit in his stomach, carving him open with this heat, his skin prickling as it flushes all up his neck.

His voice cracks when he tries to speak. “Sorry.”

“You fucking scared me.”

“I know.” He shifts so that he can pull him a little closer. “I’m sorry.” Lucas sighs. The sound is trembling slightly. Dustin feels his chest fill with a soft warmth, sunshine in his veins, even as regret dims the radiance. Lucas really was shaken up, huh? “I love you.” He’s not sure why he says it right now. It’s burning at the end of his tongue, aching to be whispered, screamed, shouted, sobbed--he wants to say it in every way possible. He wants to love his best friend in that kind of intense, all-encompassing way. He wants Lucas to be his entire world.

“I love you too,” Lucas whispers hoarsely. “God, I love you so much, you fucking idiot.” Dustin laughs, but it’s quiet.

It’s a good moment. He likes this moment. He could live in it forever.

They all end up in Troy’s room, for some reason, and then Troy acts very surprised when James finds a bottle of vodka and fools absolutely no one, and Dustin relaxes on the bed with his head on Lucas’s chest and his arms around Max’s waist, watching lazily as Allie and James attempt to talk their idiot out of chugging the vodka. It’s a nice way to spend a Monday afternoon.

“You’re literally going to die--”

“It won’t be the whole thing! Just some--”

“You’re so fucking *stupid,* oh my God.”

Max snorts. “I say do it,” she says. Allie and James immediately erupt into even louder protest, scrambling to yank the bottle out of Troy’s hands. He’s laughing too hard to stop them.

There’s a knock at the door. “Hey, kid, have you--”

Troy’s laughter stops immediately. “Yes!”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say!” Steve protests from the other side. “Jesus Christ. Did you find Dustin?”

“No,” Troy replies. “I’ll tell you when we do, now fuck off.”

Steve groans. “Fine! Fine. I was going to buy you dinner, but whatever!” His footsteps stalk away down the hall. Troy scowls at the door.

Max is stiff against him. Dustin kisses her head out of instinctual comfort, and she lets out a shaky breath that relaxes her, just a bit. “Why’d you lie?”

Troy messes with his sleeve. “No reason,” he mumbles. James sets the bottle aside and silently reaches out. Troy stares at him warily for a moment, but crawls into his arms, allowing himself to be tugged close. James kisses his temple softly. Allie settles against her boyfriend’s side.

Max is still frowning, but she just holds on tighter to Dustin. “Do you ever wonder if James is dating Allie as a front?” she asks Lucas. She doesn’t bother to whisper. That’s not the Max Mayfield way.

“A front for what?” Lucas asks, ignoring the way Allie starts laughing and James splutters something offended. Max stares at Lucas like he’s an idiot, then looks pointedly at the way Troy has curled into his friend’s chest. “Oh, for being queer?”

Dustin’s breath gets a little short. Fuck.

“Oh, shut up,” Troy says. “Even if he were, I’d be a terrible choice.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Height difference, baby! Couldn’t kiss him if I tried!”

Max and Allie both lose their shit at that. Troy grins. The sight of it eases Dustin’s panic just enough to breathe, and he snorts. “Could kiss him right now,” Lucas points out. “‘Cause he’s sitting down.”

Troy gives him a suspicious look. “Pervert,” he accuses. Lucas shrugs.

James sighs a little. It’s very smooth the way he does it, slipping his fingers under Troy’s chin; the way Troy’s head tilts back is instinctual, and then James’s head bends, and they kiss, and it’s as simple as that. It’s just a kiss, but they do it so easily. Dustin aches at the sight. He wonders if Lucas and Max kiss like that, and then he stops wondering, because it worsens the ache.

Allie and Max keep laughing. Lucas’s eyes have widened.

“Happy now?” James asks.

“Yeah.”

“I was asking Lucas, Troy.”

Troy blinks. “Oh.” Allie pats his hand.

Lucas clears his throat. “Yeah. That, uh… that was cool. Um.”

Troy snorts. “What, do you want one too?” he asks drily.

“No! I mean, I- maybe? I don’t- not from *you,* but-”

Max rolls slightly, her body melding easily into the side of Lucas’s, her laugh muffled into his shoulder. “You’re so cute,” she says, her smile bright enough to relax all of Dustin’s discomfort.

Lucas kisses her forehead, and then his head tilts, but he pauses. “I guess a girl kiss isn’t as impressive as a queer kiss,” he mumbles, and then-

Well, and then his fingers are under Dustin’s chin, and Dustin leans in

before he even thinks, and Lucas kisses him.

Lucas kisses him.

Lucas's mouth is soft and gentle and molds into Dustin's easier than it should. It's not hesitant or awkward or anything like Dustin's had before. It's just him and Lucas and slightly chapped skin, and it's short, and it's sweet, and then it's over.

Lucas kisses him. And then it's over.

Everything's silent for a moment. Dustin's eyes skitter from Lucas's face- he doesn't want to see the look on it yet- he finds Max's gaze on instinct. She's wide-eyed, but caught in a smile, and it only widens as Dustin stares at her over Lucas's shoulder. There's a pink flush over her face that makes her freckles stand out. She's wearing her tinted chapstick, and her lips are shiny and dark pink and slightly parted, and-

"Good job," Troy says.

Dustin's sense of reality slams into him all at once. His eyes leap away from Max's lips like a horse on fire, and he makes a face at Troy. "Shut up, fag."

"Dustin!" Lucas shoves him. "No!"

"I'm sorry, I'm kidding, I'm kidding-" Troy is laughing hysterically, his head falling backwards onto James's shoulder. James presses his kiss to his hair. It's subtle, but Dustin sees the way Troy's shoulders relax, and he blinks. "I think."

"You think?" Lucas's eyebrows are furrowed. "How can you-"

Troy has stopped laughing. His hands are tense against his knees. James's grip tightens around his friend's waist. "What do you mean?" he asks, and his voice is quiet, a bit low. There's something hovering in the back of the sound, half of a threat left unfinished.

Dustin swallows hard. "Nothing. I didn't mean anything. It was a joke." Troy's fingers tremble slightly. "It was a joke."

James's eyes search his face. "Okay."

"Maybe I should go." Dustin goes to sit up, but Lucas catches his wrist.

"Hey. Don't-" He hesitates. He lets go. "Don't," he repeats. The room hovers in a silence that feels like a weight, and Dustin can't quite breathe under it. Lucas's eyes are earnest, if wary; the warmth of his fingers still lingers on Dustin's wrist, heavy and bruising. Max's arms have half-wrapped around herself, hair falling over her face; Allie's hand is on Troy's knee, and her eyes are on Dustin, and her mouth is sort of twitching. He offers a timid smile back.

A timid smile doesn't fix the whole mess, even if she returns it. Dustin clears his throat, glancing down. "Uh- for the record," he tries, "I think threesomes are pretty hot."

The silence continues. Regret swells up, and panic jolts through his heart, making his throat dry, his shoulders hitch up-

James snorts. "Holy fuck, Henderson," he says, and that's all it takes for Troy to start laughing again. "Holy fuck, dude-"

"I-"

"No, no, you don't get to defend yourself, what the fuck *was* that-"

Lucas's face has split into a grin again. Somehow, that's all it takes for Dustin's spine to release its weight, and he collapses easily back into the mattress. His leg hooks into Lucas's. Lucas's foot taps against his. It feels like a promise, sort of.

Carefully, he reaches up. His fingers catch in Max's hair, nice and gentle, as he sweeps it back, tucking it behind her ear for her. "I'm sorry," he says. It's genuine. "I should have though that through."

Max hums. She hasn't relaxed back into the same comfort as the rest of them quite yet. Her hand comes up to catch Dustin's, their fingers snagging together next to her cheek. She presses a gentle kiss to his knuckles. "It's just…" Her eyes slip up to trace over Troy's face.

Lucas's grin fades down. "Max?" Unease trickles through Dustin's

veins as Max purses her lips lightly.

Her words burst out like a wooden dam shattering, sudden and sharp. “We wouldn’t mind, you know.”

Troy stops. His head cocks to the side. For a moment, Dustin braces him for the dreaded silence swarming over them again, but then Troy says, “Okay,” nice and simple. Just like that.

That’s a confession of a kind, isn’t it?

“Me too,” he says, very suddenly. “I- me too.”

“I know.”

“Shut the fuck up, Harrington.”

Troy laughs. “Aw, come on! What about Freddie Ro-”

“I hate you!” Dustin seizes the pillow from under Lucas’s head, smacking Troy in the face. “I hate you! Fucking-”

“Well, you’re a fucking fag!”

“Well, so are you!”

“Fuck yeah I am!”

“Fuck!”

It’s Max that catches Dustin around the waist and tugs him back, but it’s Lucas that wraps him in close to his chest and holds him there. “No more violence,” Max coos, patting his cheek. “No violence for baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Dustin protests. He can feel his face burning.

Max smirks and kisses his forehead. “You’re my baby.”

It takes him a second to choke out a laugh, because at first his breath all leaves him and he’s left with the feeling of drowning, caught up in the split second of contact. He blinks to get his head back and sticks his tongue out at her. She returns it without hesitation.

It’s not as simple as that, obviously. His heart is still beating from the admission, and she still doesn’t know that she’s the reason he goes breathless, and he still doesn’t understand why it’s so easy to relax against Lucas. Jane made all this so much easier. God, he misses her.

You’re my favorite.

He’s not sure why the thought pops into his head all of the sudden, poking through all the worry, but it shines like sunlight through stained glass, and everything turns rose colored. He looks over the room, over the six of them crammed into this little space, at the way they’re all tangled up and laughing, and he aches with the kind of love that doesn’t make him breathless. The kind of love that eases his breathing into gentleness.

Yeah. You’re my favorite.

Notes for the Chapter:

thumbs up emoji

please drop a comment and lemme know how you're doing & stuff!! love you all!!